Film Quarterly

Volume 53, Number 1, Fall 1999

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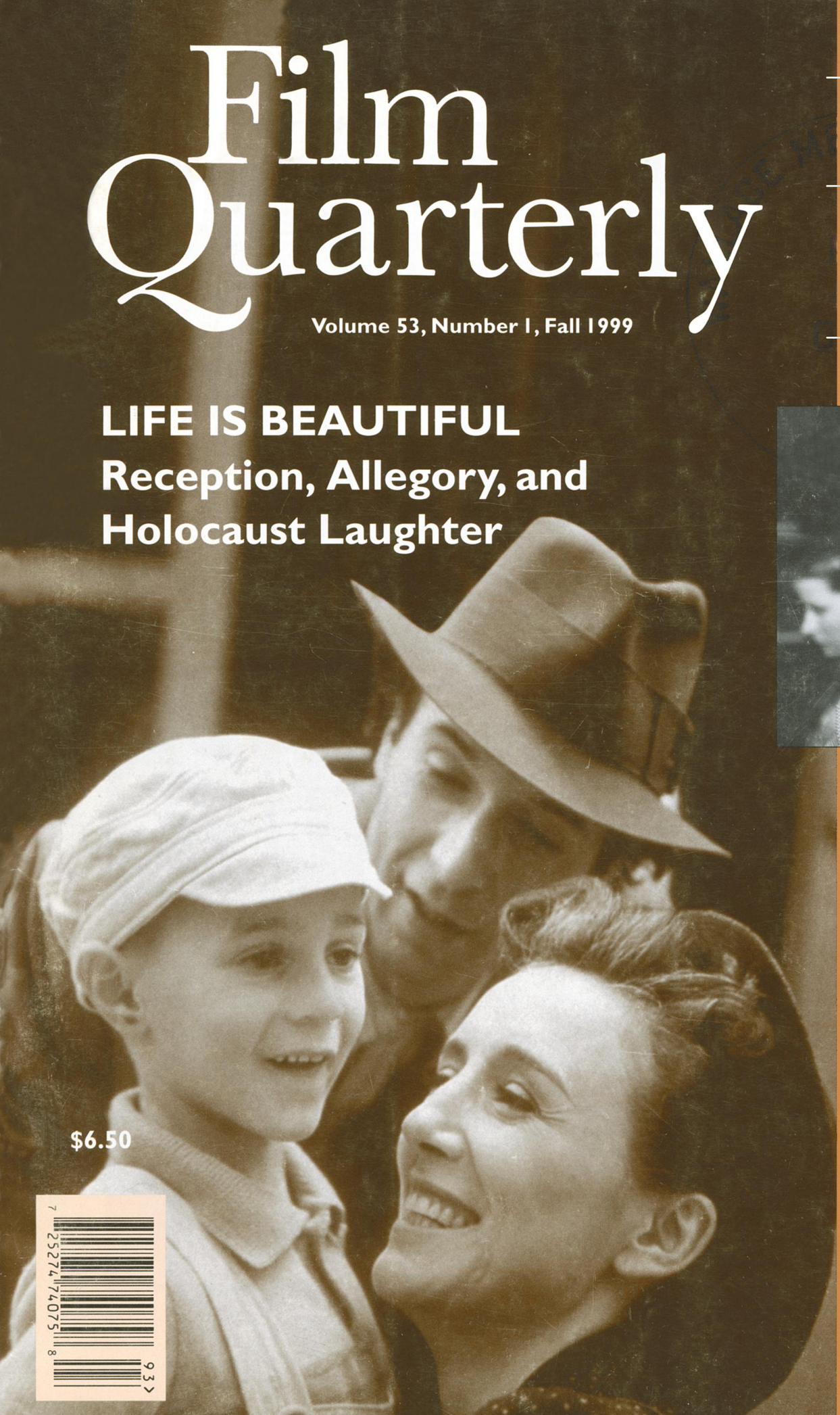
Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter



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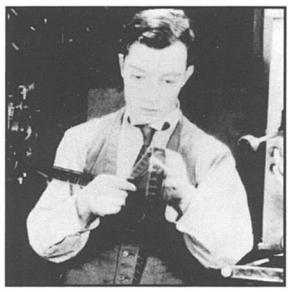

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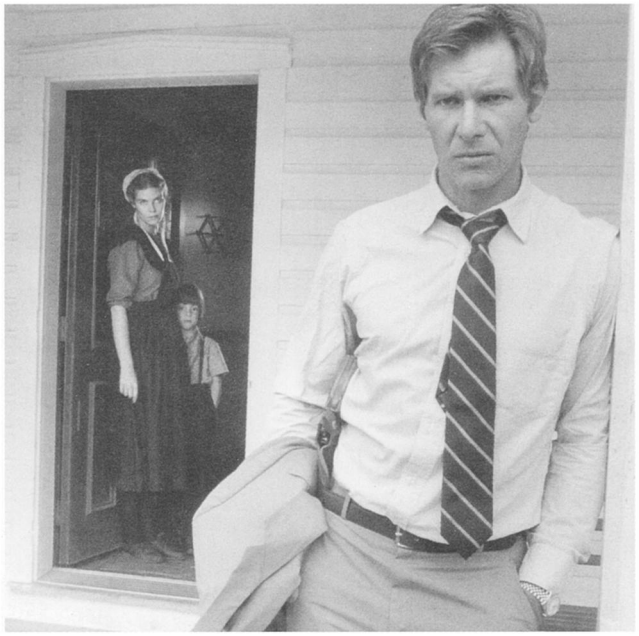
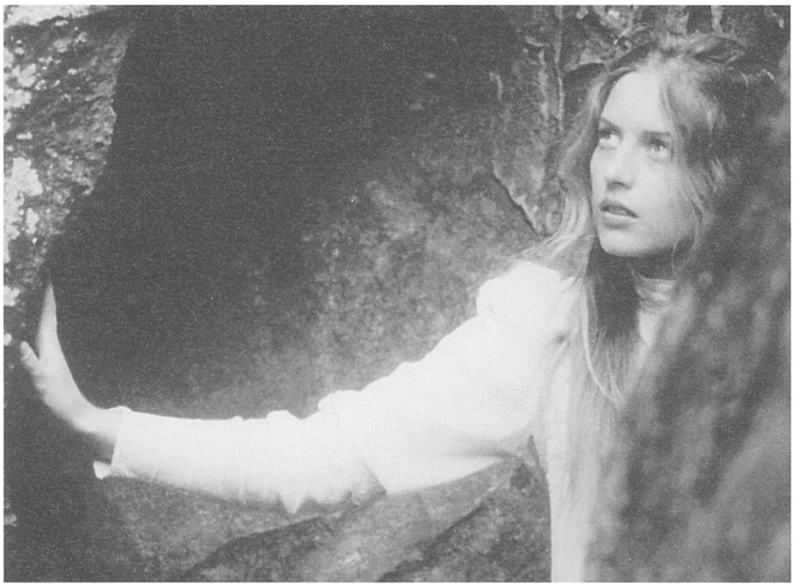
Michael Bliss



Keeping a Sense of Wonder

Australian filmmaker Peter Weir's work has received attention before, but not even Weir could have foreseen the response that greeted the release of his latest film, *The Truman Show*, which was ballyhooed as one of 1998's major media events, a rather ironic situation for a film suggesting that one should be suspicious of the media's potential for manipulation. Yet irony is nothing new for Weir, who has built his reputation on films dealing with the slippage between appearance and so-called reality. One of *The Truman Show*'s themes—that our view of reality is a result of the influence of outside forces—is also nothing new for Weir, who has been pursuing similar notions since his first widely screened film, 1974's *The Cars That Ate Paris*. Weir subsequently confounded audience expectations with films dealing with a solutionless mystery (the recently re-released 1975 film *Picnic at Hanging Rock*), white anxiety (1977's *The Last Wave*),

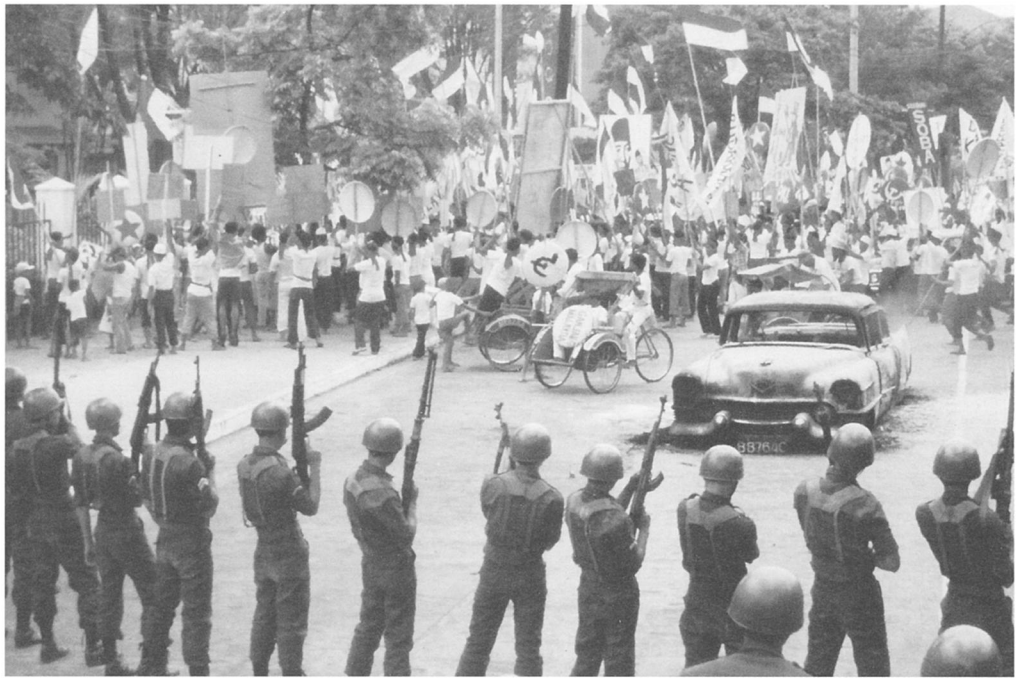
Interview with Peter Weir



Opposite page: (left) Richard Chamberlain in *The Last Wave*; (top) Sigourney Weaver in *The Year of Living Dangerously*; (bottom) Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis in *Witness*. This page (clockwise from top): Peter Weir on the set of *Mosquito Coast; Picnic at Hanging Rock; Witness*.

and fears about sexuality (the 1980 tele-film *The Plumber*). By this point in his career, Weir was arguably the most important director in Australia. He solidified this status with *Gallipoli* in 1981, a film about an incident close to many of his countrymen's heart: Australia's participation in a devastating military campaign during World War I.

In 1982, *The Year of Living Dangerously* brought Weir to the attention of producers in the United States. Weir's first American film, *Witness* (1985), proved that he could blend his interest in culture clash and religion with what was also (in *Witness* producer Edward Feldman's terms) a shoot-em-up. Despite an overwhelmingly negative reception, 1986's *The Mosquito Coast* (scripted by Paul Schrader and headed by *Witness* star Harrison Ford) remains one of the director's favorite films. Weir's most demanding, and risky, film is *Fearless* (1993), which deals with the aftereffects on



The Year of Living Dangerously

survivors of a plane crash, a notion playfully referred to via a travel poster in *The Truman Show*.

Peter Weir is an engaging and interesting man. He's also quite protective of his private reactions and feelings. Often reluctant to grant interviews, he is wary, careful to measure his responses. I spoke to him a week after *The Truman Show* premiered.

MICHAEL BLISS: *You came to prominence during a period referred to as the New Australian Cinema. What's your sense of the current state of the Australian filmmaking industry?*
PETER WEIR: National film industries tend to move in cycles. In Australia right now, we're on a high, a feeling of potential, which as yet shows no sign of flagging. But the word "industry" is misleading. A small national cinema has no industry in the Hollywood sense. It depends for its reputation on a highly talented group of individuals—writer/directors, essentially.

What prompted you to begin working in the States?
I was ready for a change after *The Year of Living Dangerously*, and looked for an American subject to film. I'd made five features, a tele-movie, and numerous short films over a 16-year period and felt in need of fresh stimulation. The first American film was to have been *The Mosquito Coast*, from the Paul Theroux novel, but we couldn't get the financing together, which was very disappointing at the time—1984. I felt so frustrated that I asked my American agent to only send me scripts that had been "green lit," in other words, financed and ready to go. He sent me three such scripts, one of which was *Witness*. *Witness*'s success revived *The Mosquito Coast*, and I went ahead and did that. There was no plan on my part to continue working in the United States. Projects just came along in seemingly random ways.

Is there any difference between making films in Australia and working within the demands of the Hollywood system?
There's certainly no difference when that troublesome scene is staring you in the face! You could be standing in the outback or on Sunset Boulevard. The creative struggle remains the same: to get the scene right. As for Hollywood, the system hasn't bothered me, and no one has ever dictated how I should make my films. All of my mistakes are my own.

You tend to repudiate the influence on your work of your extensive reading of Freud and Jung. Do you really think their ideas have no bearing on your films?
It's hard to know what influences are working on you when you make a film, or engage in any creative endeavor for that matter. You may see years later, perhaps when looking at an earlier film, that it seems remarkably under the sway of the work of some director you've admired. I saw *Mon Oncle* recently and

Witness

was surprised at how influenced by Jacques Tati I'd been in my early short films of the 1960s. As for Freud and Jung, nobody working in a creative field can help but admire their pioneering work in mapping the unconscious. Jung's *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* had a powerful impact on me and I still find myself going back to it on occasion.

There seems to be a consistency of concerns in your films: unusual states of mind, exaggerated actions, dream or near-death experiences that cause radical shifts in consciousness. Yet you often express a resistance to being typed as a certain kind of director. How do you reconcile this apparent contradiction?
So much of the work is intuitive. The resistance you detect is just that, a kind of evasion, a sense that too much analysis will inhibit creativity. I've become wary of interviews in which you're forced to go back over the reasons why you made certain decisions. You tend to rationalize what you've done, to intellectually review a process that is often intuitive. I also find interviews uncomfortable because in one sense, you don't want to know why you made certain decisions. There's almost a fear that if you understood too deeply the way you arrived at choices, you could become self-conscious. In any case, many ideas which are full of personal meaning seem rather banal when you put words to them. Apart from that I don't want to repeat myself. I'd get bored! I want to be open to new ideas, to new ways of seeing things.

Let's talk about The Truman Show. *Did the script appeal to you immediately?*
I admired it, but I didn't know whether it was possible to make it work. The original version of the screenplay was much darker, and portrayed the central character as more of an Everyman. It was also set in Manhattan. It was good science fiction, but the first thing I thought was, you couldn't do it in New York. Why build New York? Why build something that's known instead of having an idealized setting? Nevertheless, the script absolutely intrigued me. It was most untypical of Hollywood. It's just not the province of Hollywood to make a film of ideas, which is what *The Truman Show* is. The film was also on a knife edge. If you removed Jim Carrey from the equation, it probably wouldn't have been made.

Was he involved in the film from its inception?
No. While I was thinking about whether or not to accept the project, the producer, Scott Rudin, called to say that Jim was interested. I'd seen *Ace Ventura* and *The Mask* and had been impressed by Jim's originality, but he never would have occurred to me, given the tone of the script. Naturally, I'd been thinking about the casting of Truman and had come to the conclusion that he had to be a movie star. This would be necessary for the logic of the story—in other words, why did the world watch this man 24 hours a day? The answer had to be that he was a natural star. I also felt that having grown up in such a weird, unnatural atmosphere, the character would in some way be a little strange. I don't know but there's something a little "alien" about Jim. He's not the guy-next-door-type.

What was your collaboration with him like?
One aspect Jim and I discussed was the expectation for Truman to perform. I told Jim that I think we have to assume that Truman knows in a sense that he's a performer, that he's always been one. I said, Let's discuss his reality, because consider: as he grew up, he had all of these faces leaning toward him with great smiles. There was a lot of touching, a lot of false bonhomie, because people around him were actors and they wanted to get in the shot with him. These people knew that if Truman made friends with them, they'd become part of the regular cast. So first, I think he's learned that behavior. Second, he's unconsciously felt that he needed to help other people, to make them feel better. Without realizing it, he's responding to the pressure to perform.

When Christof tells him what it's all about, his being on a TV show, it would have been impractical, and perhaps problematical, for Truman to have said, "What do you mean? How could that be?," especially since the audience was well ahead of him and knew all about it. *We* want him to say, "Ah, so that was it." When he nods his head, then, everything falls into place, everything from his childhood onward. I think that what's kept him all along from questioning his world is that he unconsciously sensed that he had a very important job to do—to give love and good cheer through the smiles; to keep people's spirits up. In certain respects, this isn't dissimilar to a lot of Jim's life; there was some borrowing.

You feel that behind Truman's smiles there's a great melancholy operating.
Well, extremes always lie together. There's the cliché that all comics are sad or angry people. The clown is often quite a malevolent figure, as in horror films. Underneath, you sense there's a kind of rage. You certainly see that rage in Truman when he begins to suspect that his wife is in on the conspiracy. It comes out in that cruel, mocking humor as he's driving her around in circles.

The Truman Show

The notion of cruelty naturally brings up the character of Christof, who seems incredibly manipulative and unfeeling.

When we were in the shooting script stage, he was the character I knew the least about. In some respects he was a kind of stock villain, dressed up by scriptwriter Andrew Niccol in an interesting, new way, but nonetheless not terribly different from the sort of controlling character you'd see in a James Bond movie. It was just the *idea* of Christof that was smart and original. I thought, Well, I'll deal with that down the line. I had enough to think about getting Truman and everything else right.

We shot all of the *Truman Show* material first, and then did the control room, so by the time I came to that I had a very strong idea of what I wanted, which was influenced by all sorts of things, among which were certain politicians I've known on both sides of the political spectrum, people who are not that different from Christof in the sense that they feel that the end justifies the means. Christof also sees himself as an artist, with Truman—"True Man"—as his greatest creation. Terrifying. A kind of Dr. Frankenstein of the airwaves.

I'm also intrigued by the phenomenon of the postwar couturier, especially in the last 20 years or so, people whose persona is that of an artist, yet in actual fact they're producing commercial products. People like this have a vast and powerful empire, yet they have an aura of sensitivity, and they generally wear black, like Christof.

An additional idea is that of the artist manqué, a person born with all of the attributes and personality traits of an artist, what you might call an artistic personality, but with no métier. That type of person is often very difficult, because they just don't have a way of expressing themselves, of calming themselves through creativity. I folded all of these notions into the Christof character. And then, of course, Ed Harris came along at just the right time and understood all of this on some profound level.

Some reviewers have commented that your films often leave the audience hanging, with no satisfactory resolution being achieved.

It took some time for the right ending [for *The Truman Show*] to become apparent. Andrew and I did something like 10 drafts. In the latter stage of this process we dropped all of the scenes exterior to the dome. There were all sorts of scenes that we tried outside, but eventually the ending emerged, with Truman just walking through the studio door. It struck me that ending the film that way would allow the film to keep making itself for the viewer. I do love to walk away from a movie that keeps making itself in your mind, and I thought this one in particular would, because when you leave the enclosed world of the cinema and walk out into the reality of your world, you would, in a way, step into Truman's shoes.

The Last Wave

Your reliance on ideas and images associated with the unconscious opens up your work to a lot of criticism. One critic has accused you of a particular kind of intellectual vagueness that he refers to as "New Age," saying that this might have been fine in the late 60s and early 70s, but we're living in the real world now.
The "real" world? I'm as impatient with this kind of critic as they are with me. There's not much to say here. I see mysteries, ambiguities, contradictions all around me. Moreover, the term New Age is often used as a derogatory expression, often with justification. Yet this shouldn't for a minute stop us from thinking about who we are and what we believe in and what's real, and from discussions about religion. Yet you do increasingly strike people who agitate against any incursions into the area of what we agree is the material world and what they see as the correct ways of thinking.

There's often a kind of anger in response to this form of expression. At its most successful, it's akin to the effect that music can have on us: to induce a kind of wakeful dreaming. It certainly bypasses the intellect, which plods along afterward trying to decode the experience. With some critics, my kind of filmmaking is often the antithesis of their occupation, which is to remain objective, detached, analytical. It's like asking the wine taster to swallow the wine. You could end up drunk on the job!

What's also involved here is one of the themes in The Truman Show*: the nature of reality.*
Yes. Interestingly, the idea of what constitutes this agreed-upon reality is often spread via the medium of television.

That's rather frightening, don't you think?
Very much so, because of its stultifying quality, the power to brainwash people into beliefs.

Yet in The Truman Show*, there is a part of Truman that the media can't touch. It's hidden in his basement, a very symbolic place that suggests the unconscious.*
Well, I'd always loved that part from *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* when Jung talks at length about the basement, where he had some of his epiphanies and breakthroughs in thinking with regard to the symbolism of the basement, its underground aspect, and that attribute's connection with the archetypal aspect of human experience. Initially, in *The Truman Show* screenplay, what takes place in Truman's basement occurred in his garage. I said, I want to make it his basement where, rather pathetically, he has his secrets, his boxes within boxes, the box inside the trunk. In that basement scene we see his darker side. He's less the friendly guy in his basement; he snaps at his wife when she comes down there, into that somewhat creepy, infantile place.

There seems to be a connection between the reality/unreality theme of The Truman Show *and such films as* Picnic at Hanging Rock *and* The Last Wave.

Picnic at Hanging Rock

Yes, but *The Truman Show* deals with the concept of reality/unreality from another angle. In the case of the earlier two films there was, at least, an agreement on what "reality" is. In the media age (and remember, *The Truman Show* is set in the near future), this is not necessarily the case. The media, specifically television, has blurred the line between reality and unreality. We've even coined the phrase "virtual reality." So *The Truman Show* is really quite another story.

Looking at your films, I tend to concentrate more on deciphering the pattern of thought in and behind them, rather than on attempting to reduce them to details.
This is, after all, the point. There is this area in some of my films, some more than others, that has to do with the spontaneous, the unconscious. This is a very important aspect because it's quintessentially a part of my way of thinking, and part of the way that many of my films operate—*Picnic at Hanging Rock* for example. Acknowledging the importance of the unconscious relates to the way I've seen the world through my life; it's how I express myself.

Picnic *was re-released recently. How did you approach that film?*
I was aware from the start that I would have to do a lot of thinking about how I was going to make the film because it didn't have an ending. The whodunit has always been a rather difficult genre. That's why it was interesting reading that part of Truffaut's interview with Hitchcock in which Hitchcock talked about his impatience with a whodunit. I think that generally, the ending is a bit of a letdown in mysteries—you know, the butler did it, or whatever. This genre has waned; people require much more of a visceral reaction to what they see in films. In *Picnic*, which involves a mystery without a solution, I knew that I had to, in a sense, mesmerize the audience, to induce in them a kind of dream state in order that they wouldn't have the expectation of a conventional ending.

Isn't a dream-like effect present from the film's very beginning, in those irresolvable dissolves that begin the film?
I also did it with sound.

Are you referring to the slowed-down earthquake sounds you used?
That's right. I wanted through this method to access the audience's unconscious, since this sound is supposedly part of those collective memories that we all have with respect to sounds or vibrations. I used this sound in both *Picnic* and *The Last Wave.* We did experiments to make sure that we got it onto the optical track, even though you'd have to be in a theater with a good sound system to hear it. Under optimum conditions there is at times a slight vibration in the theater itself, as well as in the viewer's breastbone! I think I was more successful with this effect in *The Last Wave.* But in both films, this attempt was really part of experimenting with how far cinema can go in the sense of getting past the guardians of logic and freeing up and gaining access to unconscious areas and bringing the viewer into the film, having them join in its making. That's what I wanted to have happen right from *Picnic*'s opening credits.

What about the theory that a work of art is just a vehicle, an intermediate object between artist and viewer that facilitates unconscious transmission of thought? In this view, artists don't create information so much as channel it.
That reminds me of a Japanese potter I knew at one time. He explained to me how pottery to the Japanese is as highly regarded as painting in our Western tradition. The potter serves a long apprenticeship, working under a master, turning out plates, cups, bowls, that kind of thing. Every now and then the gods will touch the potter's hands, and that object will be a work of art. That's another way of expressing the theory you mention.

Do you still want to achieve the "invisible" style of filmmaking, modeled on the work of journeyman directors from the 40s and 50s, who simply, in your words, "took the projects given them and got on with the job"?
I'd prefer to be like the early Japanese potters who regularly changed their names, presumably to efface themselves and let the work stand on its own. I try to be "invisible" because only the story counts. The idea. I'm the servant of that idea. The film, whatever it is, is not about me.

But how can you ever escape the influences that have made you who you are, even if one of the effects of these influences has been to abjure them?
That's why the favorite moments in my own films are those I had the least to do with.

I understand that, as with the new cut of Picnic at Hanging Rock, *there are certain changes you'd like to make to some of your previous films.*
Let me answer that parenthetically. I find my own films hard to look at again. You'll often hear filmmakers say this. You move on, your viewpoint changes, you don't like to be reminded of a younger self—whatever it is.

Of late, I've been affected by a quote of Matisse's, from a collection of his interviews. (It was Matisse who

said that painters should have their tongues cut out, and he was right. The same could be said of directors!) He felt that his early paintings had too much emotion in them. He found them agitating, and had to take them down off the wall of his studio. He said that what he'd learned over the years is that once you've found the emotion, experienced it, and begun painting it, the feeling will never go away. You don't have to make a great deal of it; it's better to simplify it and put it in its fundamental form. The emotion may be a little less charming, in the sense of being immediately accessible, but it will never go away. In fact, it will have more power due to the simplicity because as a result of that restraint, the viewer will join in with the painter in creating the emotion. In other words, the viewer brings more to the work when the work is less emphatic.

Matisse used the example of a particular nude that he'd painted in his youth; he contrasted it with one of his dancing shapes from his later period, during which he was using cutouts. The cutout didn't have the literal lines of a female nude but still possessed the suggestive lines of one. Yet in viewing the cutout and staring at it, looking at it longer and living with it, you find a great richness of emotion in the latter work.

Fearless *didn't do well here in the States. Did its poor financial showing upset you?*
I was disappointed, but I knew that the film involved a roll of the dice. I had to make *Fearless*—I became infatuated with it. I knew that it was highly risky material, because its success would depend exclusively on the audience's desire to go and see a film about a plane crash. I wanted to make that crash incredibly effective without being shocking. But I also knew that the film's main chance, the only way that it was going to work, was if the plane crash became a metaphor. I wanted to widen the story's scope instead of narrowing it down, as do many films about illnesses or accidents in which you may feel pity or sorrow for the victim, but in a distanced way. The best case is the reverse, in which the calamity carries a wider meaning.

When the first review came in, it said, "I loved this film, but I must warn you right off before I go into details that if you're thinking of flying tomorrow, don't go see it." Well, there it was. The majority of the good reviews had little jokes like that and I thought, I'm finished, I'm done—a good review that says, "Don't go see it!"

Did those kinds of reviews make you feel that the film should have been altered in some way?
Well, there's nothing that I'd change, nothing that I'd do differently. Afterwards, though, you start to think, well, now, do I take on something commercial after that? But I decided quite the reverse. I was looking for something as interesting and difficult as *Fearless.* I told producer Scott Rudin, I don't want safe material; I'm looking for something challenging because that's what keeps me interested, keeps me alive. He sent me *The Truman Show*, which certainly fulfilled the brief I'd given Scott.

Was that script "broken" in the same sense as the one you looked at for Fearless*?*
"Broken" was really a word I was using to communicate the idea that a script was interesting but didn't quite work. All scripts need work on them. The curse of getting on the "A" list in Hollywood is that you're often not sent that kind of difficult material.

You know, it's really not that hard to direct a movie when you have good components: good script, good cast and crew. That kind of film can look pretty good. That's why a lot of actors who turn to directing make quite reasonable first films. It is hard, though, to add the X factor, to make a film luminous or have a strange power, to have it get a grip on you.

My concern is mostly with finding things that I want to do. To some extent there's a childish aspect to filmmaking. You could lose your enjoyment of it and lose interest. Keeping that interest alive is the important thing, which has a lot to do with the material you choose and the ideas inherently in it. As long as filmmaking is a way of reflecting on your life and your times, it remains very interesting.

So you have to work hard to keep that childish aspect, not in a pejorative sense, but in the form of an undiluted response to stimuli?
Yes, to keep your sense of wonder.

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Scott MacDonald

From the Sublime to the Vernacular

Jan DeBont's *Twister* and George Kuchar's *Weather Diary 1*

> The older I grow and the longer I look at landscapes and seek to understand them, the more convinced I am that their beauty is not simply as aspect but their very essence and that that beauty derives from the human presence. For far too long we have told ourselves that the beauty of a landscape was the expression of some transcendent law: the conformity to certain universal esthetic principles or the conformity to certain biological or ecological laws. But this is true only of formal or planned political landscapes. The beauty that we see in the vernacular landscape is the image of our common humanity: hard work, stubborn hope, and mutual forbearance striving to be love. I believe that a landscape which makes these qualities manifest is one that can be called beautiful.
>
> —John Brickerhoff Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*[1]

Twister

It is difficult to imagine a more typically American film than *Twister* (1996). The focus, of course, is the tornados that rip through the American Midwest—and particularly Oklahoma, North Texas, and Kansas—during the spring, annually pelting the region with hailstones the size of quarters, golf balls, or baseballs, and tearing the roofs off of houses and, in some cases, the houses themselves off the land. If *The Wizard of Oz* (1939, directed by Victor Fleming) remains the best-known filmic rendering of a tornado, the advent of The Weather Channel has brought to the regular attention of millions of TV watchers spectacular imagery of tornados swirling across vast Midwestern spaces. In the spring of 1996, Jan DeBont was able to turn this new media awareness of tornados into gold. As a result of the film's impressive special effects and the casting coup of signing Helen Hunt to play the female lead (and perhaps the timing of the film's release, which allowed it to profit simultaneously from the usual May-June excitement of moviegoers ready for an industry blockbuster, and from the particular consciousness of violent weather, at least in substantial areas of the United States, during the late spring and early summer), *Twister* became the leading money-maker of the year.

The central character of *Twister* is Bill (Bill Paxton), a scientific researcher turned weatherman, who is

in the process of leaving the adrenalin rush of storm-chasing for the more secure space of the television studio. His choice of an adventureless maturity over an exciting youth is reflected by the two women in his life: Professor Jo Harding (Helen Hunt), his former collaborator in storm-chasing and the passion of his youth; and Dr. Melissa Reeves (Cary Elwes), a reproductive therapist who loves him, but comes to recognize that she cannot compete with the more energetic, active Harding. That the male hero is rewarded with two beautiful lovers, both of whom are true only to him; that these lovers are capable, professional women who, despite their accomplishments, remain incomplete without a man; that the ultimately victorious lover is a blonde while the rejected lover is darker, "more ethnic" looking; and that the energetic Jo Harding is seen in juxtaposition to the land and the elements, while Melissa Reeves is depicted as a city person ministering to the psychic ills of city folk, are instances of patterns endemic to American pop film and television. As a result, the reuniting of the original couple is as inevitable as the counter-clockwise spinning of the tornados that periodically interrupt the plot and, for an hour and a half, conveniently (and often spectacularly) forestall the inevitable.

At least as quintessentially American as the film's heartland of America location and its central characters and plot is the way *Twister*'s Midwestern spaces are shot. Few films have made more dramatic use of the helicopter shot. As the storm-chasers follow the twisters from one town to the next, their speeding cars and vans are, again and again, filmed from helicopters that track their movements from considerable distances and heights. These helicopter shots express the characters' excitement about the adventure they're on (and the fear this excitement creates for Melissa) and in some instances provide a "storm's eye" view of the land reminiscent of the "shark's eye" views of swimmers in *Jaws* (1975, directed by Stephen Spielberg).

More fundamentally, the helicopter shots in *Twister*, as in so many other Hollywood films, reveal a typically American-cinematic attitude toward moving through space. During the 1960s, as I was becoming familiar with the European features that were making their way into American art houses, I was regularly struck (as I'm sure many others were) with a difference between the way the European films and American films of the era depicted automobile travel. In the European films, travel in an automobile was filmed either from inside the vehicle or from directly in front of the windshield, creating (at least for Americans) a sense of claustrophobia. In the American films, automobile travel was filmed from outside the vehicle, often from above the vehicle and moving along with it, creating a sense of exhilaration and freedom. The "wide open spaces" of the American frontier, first depicted by such painters as Frederic Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Thomas Moran in the nineteenth century[2] and marketed so effectively by American automobile manufacturers after World War II have remained central to American thinking about automobile travel—and about freedom, which for many Americans is less a question of the ability to choose between political or even economic options than an emotion connected with the opportunity to take off in a car and, at least for a brief moment, escape from the claustrophobic demands of family, community, and society.

Of course, as is typical of American action/adventure films, the vortex of *Twister* is not character development and the evolution of plot, but the special effects wizardry that creates the remarkably realistic illusions of the monster tornados (in this instance, done at Industrial Light and Magic in San Francisco). Indeed, the characters and plot are, for all practical purposes, excuses for these special effects—a flimsy observation platform from which we can admire the "storms" created in the film studio, storms that look remarkably like the twisters seen on television during the marketing of videos made with footage recorded by real storm-chasers. The privileging of special effects over character development and plot, and even over research into the phenomenon of tornados—despite the fact that the "good guys" are weather researchers, we learn remarkably little about tornados from this feature—is obvious throughout *Twister*. Even as we watch the film, we recognize that from the filmmakers' point of view, the real heroes are not the storm-chasers—who are merely types rather than complex, puzzling individuals—but the filmmakers themselves, who have "done the impossible" by creating a believable facsimile of a reality with which television has made us familiar. Indeed, *Twister* periodically alludes to the tradition of the special effects film of which it is a part: the device the storm-chasers mean to place in the path of a tornado so that the winds can lift it into the funnel (the computer device will allow for the more sophisticated study of tornados, and more accurate predictions about their paths) is called "Dorothy," after the *Wizard of Oz* character, and when a house rolls across the road during a chase late in the film, it is difficult not to think of Keaton's tornado in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.* (1927). Indeed, *Twister* was marketed as a landmark in special effects history: "From the Producers of 'JURASSIC PARK' and the Director of 'SPEED,'" the *Twister* poster tells us.

Still another typically American dimension of *Twister*, and one of the most fundamental, is the paradox at the heart of the film. As usual in an American action/adventure film, *Twister*'s plot has two basic elements: first, there's a romance between a man and a woman (they don't get along initially, but slowly come to love each other—in *Twister*, the gap between the man and woman is unusually small); and second, there's a competition between the Good Guys and the Bad Guys. In this instance, the Good Guys are the storm-chasers who developed "Dorothy" out of a love of pure science and a commitment to saving lives (a commitment originally instigated by a tornado's carrying away Jo's father, before her eyes, during her childhood, which we see in a period-piece flashback at the beginning of the film). The Bad Guys are members of a less capable but better-financed rival group and have stolen Bill and Jo's ideas; they plan to market the data their version of "Dorothy" collects for personal gain and media prestige and for the profit of their corporate sponsor. It is quite clear in the film that the Bad Guys have no concern for human life; they refuse to stop to help the Good Guys even when it appears someone is injured, unlike the Good Guys, whose respect for human life fuels both their research and their practical acts. The Bad Guys' corruption is reconfirmed when Bill, who has fallen from innocence to become a weatherman, realizes he cannot live with the Bad Guys' desecration of his principles, and leaves his corporate media career to return to his immersion in the natural world, outdoors with his Eve.

In other words, the producers of *Twister* sing the praises of a set of attitudes and a course of action precisely the opposite of their own. The people at Industrial Light and Magic who labored to produce the realistic illusions of tornados were hardly outdoor workers; they confined themselves to their studio facilities as fully as TV weathermen are confined to the TV studio. And of course, the goal of their work was media prestige (i.e., the public recognition of their special effects efforts) and, in the end, the financial success of the film and those who invested in it. In *Twister*, the Good Guys are simply a means to the achievement of the Bad Guys' aims; romance and the idea of innocence are a means of distracting the audience from recognizing that, by buying tickets to *Twister*, we're supporting Bad Guys in order to have the opportunity to root for and identify with Good Guys.This paradox

Above and opposite page: Bill Harding (Bill Paxton) and Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) run from an oncoming tornado in *Twister*.

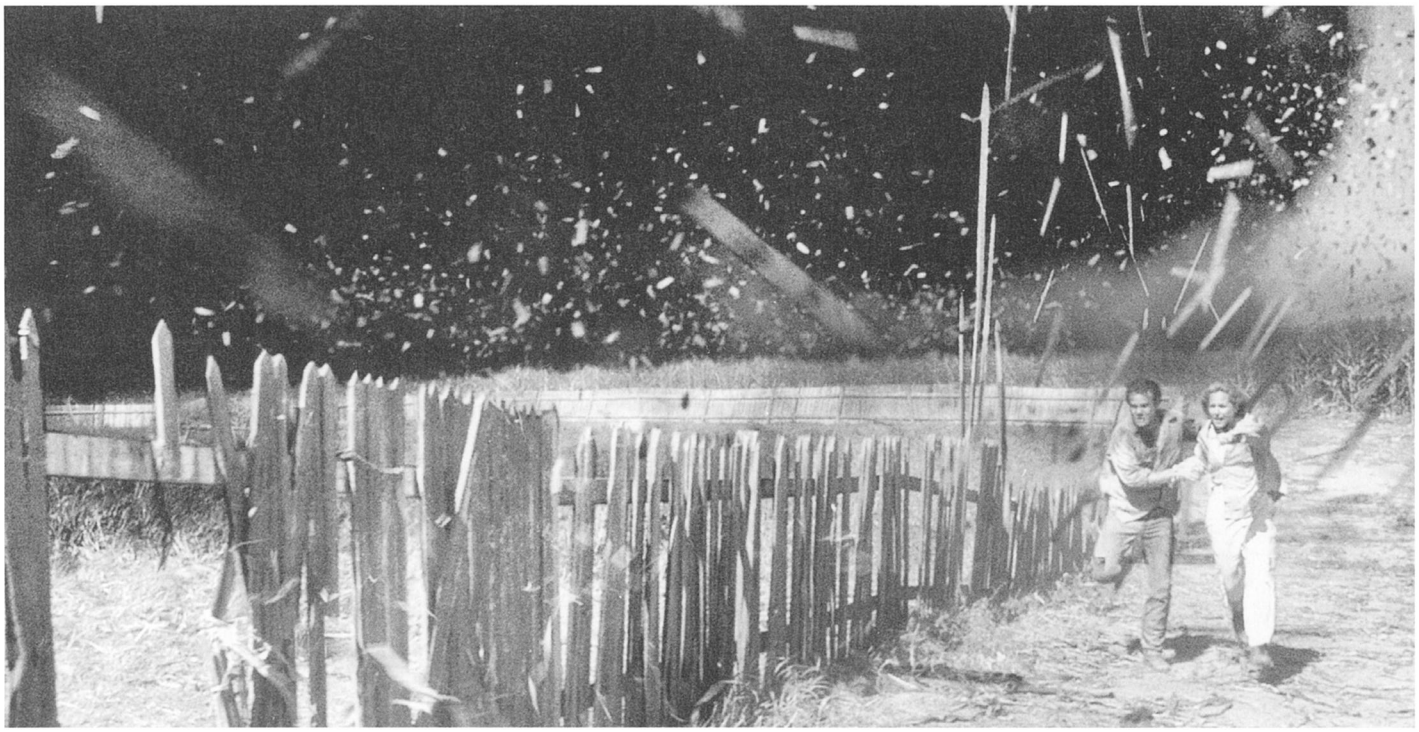
is, of course, a contemporary version of a pattern that has informed the history of the American visual arts for more than a century (as well as, according to Simon Schama in *Landscape and Memory*, many of the cultures brought to America by nineteenth-century immigrants).[3]

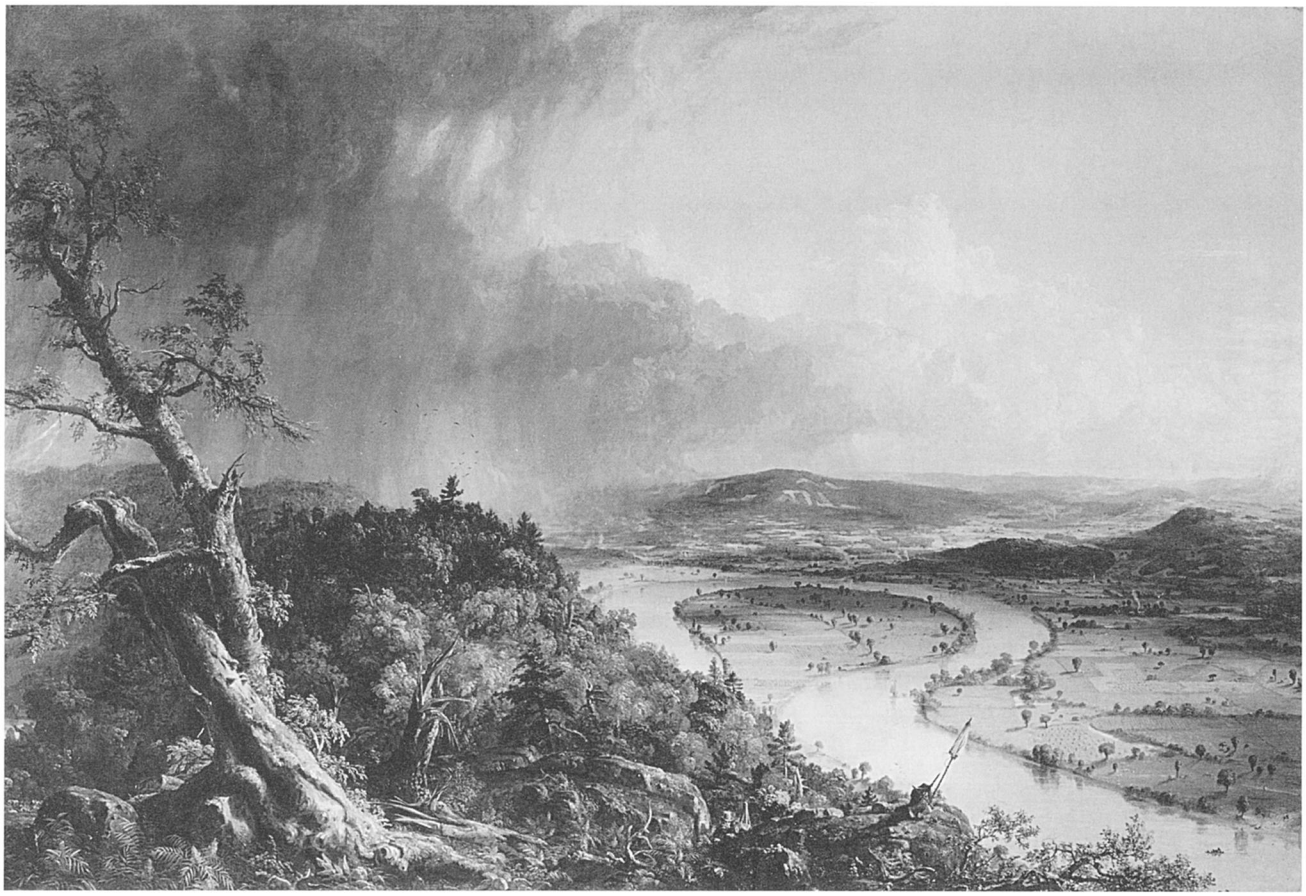
Albert Boime has defined this pattern in *The Magisterial Gaze*:

> Hence the losing game played by Americans [during the Nineteenth century]: on the one hand, their conditions for success depended on the razing of the wilderness and the cultivation of a splendid civilization, while with each inch of cultivated soil a little piece of their innocence disappeared. There was no way not to glorify the material development as progress, and there was no way to avoid condemning its results. The realization of the American dream implied the total corruption of the dreamer.[4]

Boime's focus is landscape painting, not weather, but the loss of innocence he describes is played out in *Twister*, both within the narrative and on the production level of the film. At the end of *Twister*, the Good Guys are, of course, successful: "Dorothy" is deployed, thousands of individual sensors are carried into the funnel of the F-5 tornado,[5] and the storm-chasers' computers are flooded with new information about this, and implicitly all, tornados—so much information that Bill and Jo are already arguing about who will be in charge of which of the facilities they'll need to build to process it. Implicitly the sublimity of the tornado—the real, uncontrollable power that is communicated by The Weather Channel imagery of tornados and by the special effects of *Twister*—is destroyed; the "wilderness" at the center of the funnel is rendered understandable and, if not harmless, at least predictable, that is, soon to be no longer a danger to the population of Oklahoma; and the more intensive tornado research now in the offing surely promises new industries and new products.[6]

On the production level of the film this same pattern is played out, though at an even more complete level of control. While the Good Guys have begun to develop a new data base for the study of the elements at their most sublime, the special effects people at Industrial Light and Magic are in the business of manufacturing the illusion of sublimity itself.[7] Whether their special effects are based on a thorough knowledge of tornados or simply on a body of special-effects research with only a tenuous connection to meteorological realities, they have found a way to duplicate the visual experience originally provided by





Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm (The Oxbow)*. Reprinted by permission of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908. (08.228)

Cole's painting has become one of the most discussed American paintings of the nineteenth century because of its ingenious way of posing the question (note the shape of the river that bisects the painting) of how fully natural wilderness (represented by the forest and storm on the left) should be sacrificed to agricultural development (on the right).

real storm-chasers in the field without putting themselves in any physical danger. That is, the adventurousness that seems to have inspired *Twister* has become, at most, a technical and financial challenge not very different from the many other challenges the history of special effects has overcome.

During the final credits of *Twister* (the final, and only, credits; no credits open the film—presumably a way of carrying viewers into the adventure), DeBont provides a poignant visual coda, both to the film and to the history of visualizing the sublime that implicitly informs it. Avoiding, for the most part, studio-produced special effects (and even the flashy helicopter shots that energize the body of *Twister*), DeBont provides a montage of shots of skyscapes, impressive both because of their subject matter and because we so rarely see the 35mm, wide-screen image devoted to imagery of weather. Compared with the frenetic action during the film, these shots provide an obvious denouement, a calm *after* the storm, that allows those willing to stay in the theater the opportunity to see a series of lovely, but impressive images reminiscent of the tradition of storm paintings in nineteenth-century American art: Thomas Cole's *View from Mount*

John Steuart Curry, *Tornado over Kansas* (1929). Reprinted by permission of the Muskegon Museum of Art.

Midwestern regionalist John Steuart Curry was committed to representing American life: here he images the experience of a tornado, a common event during his Kansas boyhood. As artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin College of Agriculture (the first artist-in-residence at an American university), Curry dedicated himself, as George Kuchar has, to democratizing access to art education and art-making.

Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts (The Oxbow) (1836), *Tornado* (1831), and *Catskill Mountain House: The Four Elements* (1843-44); Bierstadt's *Storm in the Rocky Mountains, Mt. Rosalie* (1866) and *Buffalo Trail: The Impending Storm* (1869); and Martin Johnson Heade's *Approaching Storm: Beach Near Newport* (c. 1860) and *Thunderstorm over Narragansett Bay* (1868). . . . This tradition has been periodically revived in the twentieth century by, for example, Wisconsin regionalist John Steuart Curry in *Tornado* (1929) and *Line Storm* (1934). And yet, a century after a generation of painters provided opportunities to meditate on the divinely informed storms that shape the North American environment, DeBont's faith in viewers' ability to enjoy even a fleeting glance at what, a century ago, was the mainstream of what was considered sublime, is so tenuous that his montage is, literally, an afterthought. Indeed, just as the tornados we see in *Twister* are studio facsimiles of twisters seen on television—that is, many levels removed from the reality of the elements—even these final images of sky, storm, and land must be seen "through" the rolling credits listing the film's dozens of special effects workers.

Weather Diary 1

By the time he made *A Town Called Tempest* (1963), George Kuchar had been making films (in collaboration with his twin brother, Mike) for six years. Using the most inexpensive film equipment available—silent, 8mm "home-movie" equipment—the boys had begun, at fifteen, by enlisting their friends, family, and neighbors, and using whatever money, costumes, and props they could scrounge. They produced a series of bizarre melodramas, based on the commercial films they loved, but (because of their limited resources) so distant from Hollywood as to seem like send-ups of the industry—and so distinctive as to influence many of the filmmakers and prospective filmmakers who saw the Kuchar brothers' films in New York City at screening venues devoted to what was then called Underground Film.[7]

A Town Called Tempest was one of the most elaborate of the brothers' 8mm melodramas. For it, they developed a preposterous, risqué plot about a Midwestern adolescent whose parents don't appreciate him. He decides to build a storm cellar, but his shallow parents worry that he's a bit demented. In order to "make him a man," his father gives the boy five dollars to go to a brothel. On his way to the brothel the boy meets a girl who asks him to go to Mass, but he does as his father has ordered him and proceeds to the brothel, where he meets a middle-aged prostitute. Before the boy can discover sex, the threat of a tornado sends him running home and into his storm cellar. He survives the tornado, and joins the other survivors in a parade through the destroyed town. Once again, he meets the young girl who wanted him to go to Mass and confesses to her that he kept his parents out of the storm cellar on purpose (the girl is shocked, leaves, and turns to drugs). The procession ends at the brothel, the only house still standing. The prostitute the boy had met earlier has survived the tornado and has decided to go straight. When the boy arrives, she grenades him, then the brothel.

While it is tempting now to read *A Town Called Tempest* as a parable of the filmmakers' own adolescence—and perhaps of their filmmaking as a place of safety within what they felt was an inhospitable environment—viewers at the time were entertained by the humorous absurdity not only of the plot, but of the presentation of the story: the awkward acting, the ridiculous costumes, the "incompetent" continuity (for the parade of survivors, the Kuchars filmed a real church parade of some sort held in an obviously different location from their action), and the amusing juxtaposition of the Kuchars' makeshift visuals with passages of music lifted from commercial melodramas. But what was, and remains, most impressive about *A Town Called Tempest* is the tornado itself. Using toys, drawings, whatever they could make or find, the Kuchars created a storm that is impressive despite (and/or because of) the obviousness of its fabrication. It is a special effects sequence that disobeys the most fundamental rule of commercial special effects: in *A Town Called Tempest* all the seams show, and we can see exactly how the effects were produced. And yet, the sheer dedication of the young filmmakers, obvious in the elaborateness of the sequence, gives the climax of the film a bizarre dignity based more on our recognition of their creative desire (and of their obvious awareness of how real Hollywood effects are, in fact, accomplished) than on the film's ability to fool us into believing what we know is not true.[8]

By the mid-1960s, the Kuchar twins were working separately, and both had begun to work in 16mm. Many of George Kuchar's early 16mm films are melodramas with much in common with the collaborative 8mm films, especially in their frankness and personal openness, but with an increasingly remarkable visual sense that is already evident in his second 16mm film, *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1966), a portrait of Kuchar himself as a filmmaker using his power as director to compensate for his erotic frustrations.[9] In addition to melodramas, however, Kuchar was also, from time to time, making personal documentaries, including a diary of his relationship with visual artists Red Grooms and Mimi Gross (*Encyclopedia of the Blessed*, 1968), a documentation of George Segal at work (*House of the White People*, 1968), and *Wild Night in El Reno* (1977), a short evocation of a stormy night Kuchar spent in El Reno, Oklahoma, (thirty miles due west from Oklahoma City, and one hundred miles due south of Wakita, Oklahoma, a crucial location in *Twister*). *Wild Night in El Reno* was to become the seed for a series of videotapes Kuchar would call "The Weather Diaries."[10]

Wild Night in El Reno is an exquisite, carefully composed and edited, overtly diaristic six-minute short, which begins with several postcard images of Oklahoma countryside (these are shot from projected slides; Kuchar pulls aside a curtain to reveal the images) and the opening title: "Wild Night in El Reno/Photographed at the FRONTIER MOTEL 2215 Sunset Drive." During the body of the film Kuchar first presents a sequence of beautiful shots of grass blowing in the wind, filmed behind the motel and through the window of his room; then (after a posed snapshot, filmed from a projected slide, of himself stand-

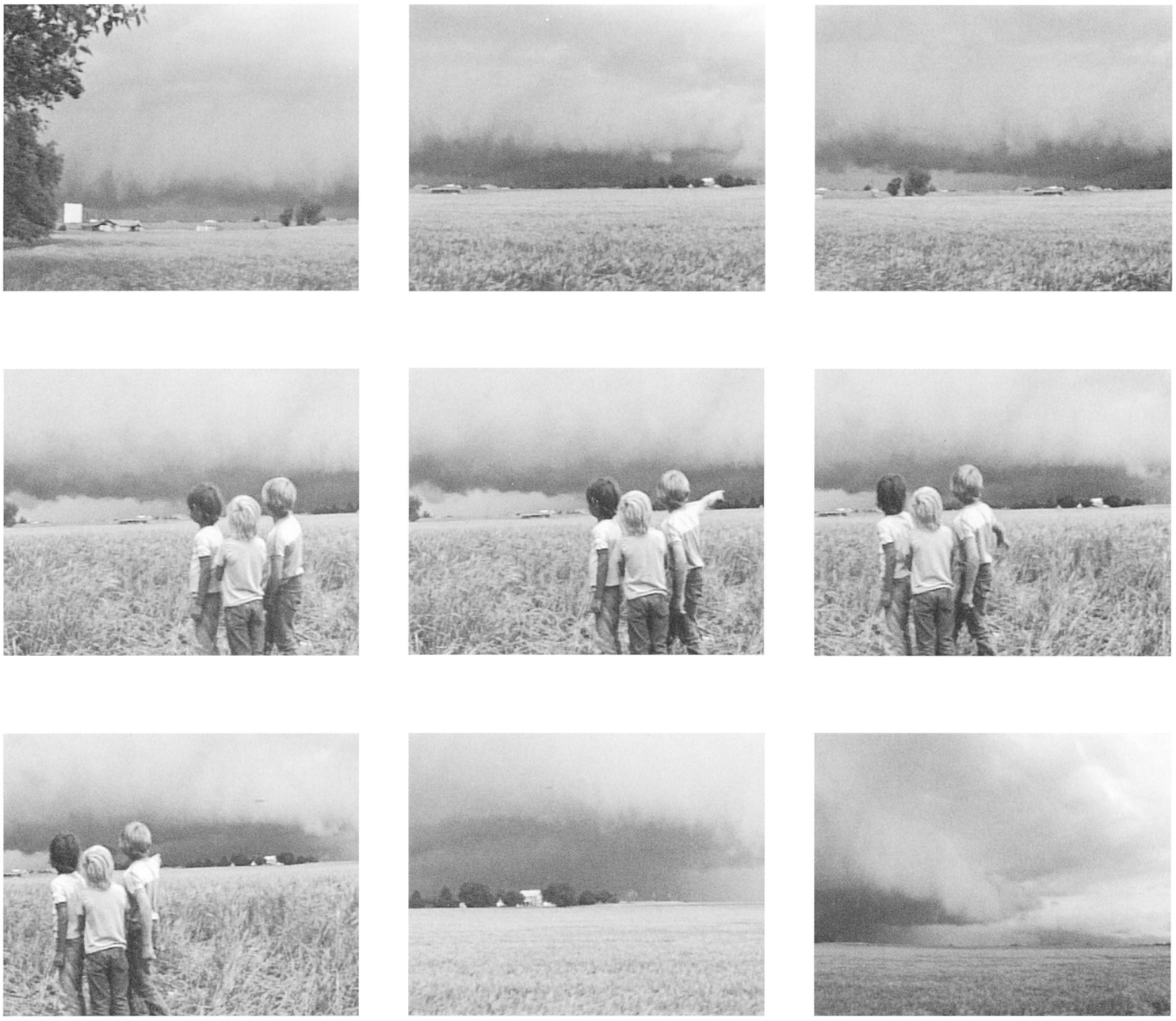
ing near a wall with the graffito "Jimmy Rush Is A Pussy") we see shots of a storm. The storm intensifies into the night and at its height, Kuchar intercuts between impressive shots of lightning and of a woman running to an outdoor phone booth in torrential rain. In the morning, there is a gorgeous golden rainbow; and Kuchar concludes with more shots of the grass in the breeze near the motel and with the title "by GEORGE KUCHAR May 1977 Canadian County Oklahoma." Like the early melodramas, *Wild Night in El Reno* has a soundtrack constructed of passages lifted from commercial movies: bits of music, a clock ticking, bells that toll as the storm grows violent, the sound of a door closing. But *Wild Night in El Reno* reverses the ratio of trashy humor and sensual beauty that characterizes the melodramas (with the exception of John Waters, few of Kuchar's imitators seem to have realized that it is this combination—and not just the trashiness and the humor—that makes George Kuchar's films so distinctive). The title seems to suggest an experience akin to the melodramas, but with the exception of bits of humor supplied by the juxtaposition of sound and image and the "trashiness" of the graffiti, *Wild Night in El Reno* is a film dedicated to the everyday natural beauty, and sublimity, the filmmaker experiences in a particular place and time.

Kuchar remained a productive filmmaker well into the 1980s, working alternately on his own and with his students at the San Francisco Art Institute; but for reasons of cost and facility, he was also beginning to work in video; and during the past decade has become a prolific and widely known independent video artist (the Video Data Bank in Chicago publishes a separate catalogue for Kuchar's videos).[11] The inexpensiveness of shooting video seems to have freed Kuchar's diaristic impulse and has led to a series of "Weather Diaries"—fourteen as of 1998, at least one a year. For me, the most interesting of these remains *Weather Diary 1* (1986). But a good case can be made for *Weather Diary 2* and *2 1/2* (1987), *Scenes from a Vacation* (*Weather Diary 6*, 1990), *Sunbelt Serenade* (*Weather Diary 9*, 1993), and *Season of Sorrow* (*Weather Diary 12*, 1996).

The relative accessibility of contemporary video technology (combined with Kuchar's resources at the San Francisco Art Institute) resulted in his redefinition of video production—just as his limited resources in the early 1960s resulted in a redefinition of cinematic melodrama. But while Kuchar was/is equally "himself" as a film artist and as a video artist—there is no mistaking a Kuchar film or video—the Weather Diaries are unconventional in quite a different sense than the early 8mm melodramas. While the Kuchar Brothers' melodramas condense a considerable awareness of Hollywood filmmaking into shorts (most of the early films are from twelve to twenty minutes long), the Weather Diaries—especially the first few—are unconventional in their expansion of what, at least at first glance, seems a minimal amount of experience into generally longer works: *Weather Diary 1* is 81 minutes; *Weather Diary 2* and *2 1/2*, 60 minutes; *Weather Diary 3* (1988) is only 24 minutes, but *Weather Diary 4* (1988), a second section of *Weather Diary 3*, which was made "to apologize for the lack of good weather" in that Weather Diary, is 47 minutes; and *Weather Diary 5* (1989), 38 minutes.[12]

Like *Wild Night in El Reno*, *Weather Diary 1* and all the other Weather Diaries (except for the fourth) were made in the same neighborhood in El Reno. This time, Kuchar is staying at the Motel Reno, but the nearby Frontier Motel is visible in a number of shots. While *Wild Night in El Reno* focuses on the natural surround of the motel before, during and after one stormy night, *Weather Diary 1* embeds its depiction of the rural surround of the Motel Reno during a month's worth of weather within a series of intimately personal observations and reflections—personal in the most literal sense: the first shot of Kuchar's motel room is a pan from the toilet in the bathroom to the unmade bed; and during the videotape we learn about all the details of his stay, from his bathroom habits (at one point, Kuchar documents his own feces!) to his personal hygiene (we see him washing his underwear, drying his socks).

Though to a contemporary sensibility Kuchar's diary would seen virtually the opposite of anything that could be called classic American literature, *Weather Diary 1* has so much in common with Thoreau's *Walden* that it can be considered a contemporary version of it. It's true that Kuchar is not in the woods, and his Bronx accent (an accent he continues to maintain, despite living more than twenty years in California) seems a far cry from Thoreau's educated literary style. But similarities between Kuchar and Thoreau are more fundamental and more suggestive. Thoreau's epic personal essay is a record of a "Life in the Woods"; Kuchar records a life in "the sticks." Like Kuchar's, Thoreau's idiom was defiantly personal, for his time. If he uses an educated literary address to the reader of *Walden*, Thoreau nevertheless was unusual in referring to himself in the first person ("In most books, the 'I,' or first person, is omitted; in this it will be retained . . .").[13] In other words, even if we see Kuchar's video as a mock-heroic version of *Walden* (just as it's possible to read *Walden* as a mock heroic version of the travel journals and wilderness writing so popular in the nineteenth century), Kuchar's mock-heroism is more fully an attempt to live an experience akin to the one Thoreau describes than to critique it.[14]



Sequence from *Weather Diary I*

I like to think of this connection with Thoreau as confirmed by Kuchar's first vocal address to the viewer: as we look out the motel-room window at the pouring rain, Kuchar says, "Sometimes there are so many pools of water outside this motel that it's like lakeside property. I think the animals love it, like the birds and the dogs. Certainly there's a lot of birds and dogs around." Like Thoreau in "Economy," the opening chapter of *Walden*, Kuchar makes clear the details of his place, revealing the simple wardrobe he's brought with him (a couple pairs of socks and underwear, one pair of tennis shoes . . .) and the simple food he's stocked in the motel room's refrigerator (a jar of jelly, a few cans of this and that). It is obvious that, like Thoreau, Kuchar has come to El Reno precisely to avoid a more "sophisticated," complex life, and to see if he cannot learn, as Thoreau puts it, "sometimes to be content with less"[15]—and, of course, to use

this opportunity to study developments taking place in the natural world around him.

Kuchar's imagery of the storms and skyscapes around El Reno is extensive and beautiful in the most traditional sense. *Weather Diary 1* is full of the kind of imagery we see through the rolling credits at the end of *Twister*, and even if the technology for good video presentation remains less accessible than good 35mm film projection, Kuchar's composition and timing give his images of Tornado Alley's big skies, impressive cloud formations, and exquisite color considerable power; these images are arresting enough to recontextualize the rest of what Kuchar shows us. To put this another way, if conventional television seems to miniaturize and marginalize natural vistas, generally using such imagery as part of heavily edited newsclips or ads, Kuchar reorients video technology with regard to his natural surround. While even the most impressive tornados shown by The Weather Channel on Kuchar's TV are contained by the box of the TV itself, and by the structures of media language, Kuchar's unusual personalization of video production causes him—and to a degree us—to feel surrounded by the meteorological developments occurring around him. The effect is to enlarge the storms, including a tornado that blows past El Reno during the month Kuchar is there—or, to put this in art-historical terms, to reinvest this particular landscape with the feeling of the sublime. While The Weather Channel and the local weather reports Kuchar listens to are involved in processing the storms they cover—and use imagery recorded by storm-chasers to energize the viewer's interest in these storms—Kuchar's *Weather Diary 1* makes quite clear that those staying at the Motel Reno and those living in several trailers across the way have no storm cellar to use should a tornado come their way. Kuchar jokes about the danger with a Native American woman who lives in one of the trailers, but it is clear that as the storms develop, he (and she) are in some danger. The frightening power of nature is obvious both in Kuchar's imagery of the storm clouds and the storms themselves, and in his narration: at one point during the storm he comments, "That Indian lady in her trailer must be shittin' in her underwear!" After a pause, he adds, "I soiled *mine* earlier."

As was true even in his earliest films, the power of Kuchar's work in video is his combination of the beautiful and the sublime with the mundane and, in some instances, with the disgusting. Indeed, for Kuchar these very different kinds of experience define each other and, in their interface, characterize human experience. Early in *Weather Diary 1*, Kuchar includes a close-up of an empty, flushing toilet as a metaphor for the funneling air of the tornados he's come to El Reno to be near, and of course, these spiraling motions are two versions of the same gravitational pull. For Kuchar, the connection is quite intimate: too much spiraling in the world outside his motel room tends to produce internal "storms" that require his more frequent use of the toilet. Late in the videotape, Kuchar mentions that the nearby tornado in Edmond, Oklahoma, "also caused . . . ," followed by a shot of vomit hitting the toilet. The viewer's disgust parallels Kuchar's personal turmoil during the storm. It's a while before he cleans up the bathroom, just as the clean-up in Edmond takes a while. In a general sense, Kuchar's tape develops a parallel between the damage tornados cause when they touch down and the "damage" Kuchar's tape can cause an unwitting viewer. When I've shown *Weather Diary 1* in classes, some students have been angered by Kuchar's candidness, and take time to recover from his confrontation of their sensibilities; and at the 1996 Robert Flaherty Seminar, Kuchar's presentation of the tape resulted in the most volatile exchange of the week.[16]

Kuchar's general awareness of nature's sublime power also has a very different effect. In *Twister*, the pressure of the danger of chasing tornados creates camaraderie among the storm-chasers; in *Weather Diary 1*, such pressure intensifies perception. Like Nick Adams recovering from "shell-shock" by hiking to the Big Two-Hearted River in Hemingway's story, Kuchar's fear and excitement at being in "Tornado Alley"—and being there alone for what feels an extended period of time—results in an alertness about natural phenomena, not only the beautiful skyscape and landscape vistas mentioned earlier, but the more intimate natural events that happen within these vistas. As is clear in Kuchar's first comments in the video, he is particularly attuned to animals. His friendship with an apparent stray he calls "Runt" is a motif throughout the tape, and even a tiny spider he finds crawling on his ceiling lamp fixture is recorded in exquisite detail. In *Weather Diary 1* Kuchar uses video technology to free himself, and us, from the usual distractions of media, in the interest of alerting us to a more engaged experience of the macrocosmic and microcosmic dimensions of nature.

During the century that passed between Thoreau's writing *Walden* and Kuchar's making *Weather Diary 1*, the relationship between Americans and their natural surround changed dramatically. If Thoreau is able to move toward what seems like the edge of the industrialized world by means of a short hike out of Concord (even he doesn't move *beyond* that world: local railroad tracks cut across one edge of Walden Pond's boundaries), Kuchar's journey to El Reno takes him from one developed region to another (indeed, the cheap motels

he stays in during the Weather Diaries suggest that he has arrived in El Reno *after* development in the region has peaked: these motels have seen better days).[17] For those nineteenth-century Americans interested in experiencing the sublime, an escape from the mundane seemed essential, whether it meant traveling into the Maine woods from Concord or travelling long distances to see Niagara or Yosemite. Indeed, for some theorizers of the psychic and physical benefits of a periodic experience of the sublime, this exit from mundane reality was essential. As Frederick Law Olmsted put it in his preliminary report for the Yosemite Commission in 1865,

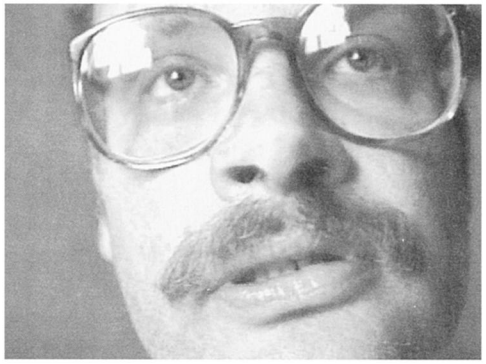
> It is a scientific fact that the occasional contemplation of natural scenes of an impressive character, particularly if this contemplation occurs in connection with relief from ordinary cares, change of air and change of habits, is favorable to the health and vigor of men and especially to the health and vigor of their intellect beyond any other conditions which can be offered them, that it not only gives pleasure for the time being but increases the subsequent capacity for happiness and the means of securing happiness.

And for Olmsted, full appreciation of this invigorating experience required that it be, as completely as possible, unalloyed:

> The first point to be kept in mind then is the preservation and maintenance as exactly as is possible of the natural scenery; the restriction, that is to say, within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodation of visitors, of all artificial constructions and the prevention of all constructions markedly in harmony with the scenery or which would unnecessarily obscure, distort or detract from the dignity of the scenery.[18]

So far as Olmsted can understand, the deepest enjoyment of natural landscape can only be accomplished if nature's dignity is separated from the mundane, framed off from the industrializing surround.

In our time, the "frames" between the natural/sublime and the industrialized/mundane have become so perforated that there is virtually nowhere we can go to escape the sorts of distractions Olmsted means to avoid in Yosemite.[19] And yet, as Kuchar demonstrates in *Weather Diary 1*, even in our mediated, postmodern world, the beauty and even the sublimity of nature—as well as the experience of escaping to rediscover them—remain available. After all, nothing helps Kuchar and the viewer recognize the awesome power of the tornado that rips by El Reno in May 1986 more fully than the presence of those flimsy trailers across the way. It may be that, as Olmsted suggests, we need to exit from our day-to-day lives and our usual terrain to reawaken our own ability to perceive the loveliness of nature and to feel its awesome power, but *Weather Diary 1* suggests that wherever we go, we can find this experience, so long as we learn to use the inevitable, pervasive mundane to provide a psychic "frame" for an immersion within the awesome power of Nature.



George Kuchar

When Kuchar packs up to leave Motel Reno, he seems ready to rejoin his workaday life, and he is also clear that his experience in El Reno has been valuable enough, for him as a person and as a videomaker, to return to: his last words, to Runt (and implicitly to the viewer), are, "Take care of yourself. Maybe I'll see you next year." That Kuchar's experiences did in fact reenergize him is explicit in the fact that he continues to travel to Oklahoma to produce an annual Weather Diary, and implicit in the consistent self-reflexivity of each Weather Diary.

Weather Diary 1, for example, is self-reflexive from its opening moments. Kuchar begins with a shot of the front of the Reno Motel in heavy rain, which is interrupted three times: first, by the painted title, "Weather Diary 1," then by a shot of a nearby trailer and tree, followed by the pan from bathroom to bed; and finally by Kuchar's opening comment to the audience and a synch-sound extreme close-up of his face, filmed from below. This is a signature Kuchar camera angle that, ever since its use in *Hold Me While I'm Naked*, has been amusing not only because Kuchar's face is precisely *not* a face we expect to see in an extreme close-up, but because it is obvious that Kuchar is holding the camera himself. Kuchar fans share a camp awareness that the pensive look on Kuchar's face, his "candid" gaze into the distance is being performed for the camera he is holding—and that he's holding the camera in order to mimic the kind of industry tracking shot he can't af-

ford to make. A return to the opening shot of the motel leads into the videotape's first use of local coverage of tornado damage. As an expression of the narrative, this bit of intercutting (especially noticeable because we keep returning to the same shot) reflects the character's slight anxiety about the storm—subsequently substantiated by the news coverage of the tornado. But it is also Kuchar-the-director's immediate declaration that while we will see his personal experiences, we'll be seeing them as they were performed for the camera and fabricated into a work of video art.

Kuchar's self-reflexivity is an ongoing motif throughout the Weather Diary series. Indeed, each new Weather Diary implies a comparison with the previous Diaries that keeps viewers focused on Kuchar-as-director. Each change in approach, each evolution of the Kuchar persona becomes part of the meta-narrative that develops Diary after Diary. Indeed, my earlier comparison between Kuchar and Thoreau seems confirmed by Kuchar's regular return to El Reno. While the original one-month stay in El Reno for *Weather Diary 1* was too brief to be more than a metaphor for the two years Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, Kuchar's regular return to Oklahoma has resulted in his living in El Reno for more than a year, a year of Mays.

The most obvious relationship between the successive Weather Diaries is Kuchar's annual return to El Reno and his focus on weather. But there are many particular filmic gestures that become motifs in the Weather Diary series: the "signature shot," described earlier, for example; and the "shit shot" of Kuchar's feces—seeing Kuchar's turds in *Weather Diary 1*, *2*, and *3* prepares us for *Weather Diary 4*, where we only *hear* him defecating; for *Weather Diary 5*, where Kuchar sits down on the toilet and we *don't* get a "shit shot"; and for *Weather Diary 6*, where an *animated* turd flies into the toilet. . . . In more recent Weather Diaries, Kuchar has developed another "signature shot," equally self-reflexive as his hand-held close-up: from the video camera on the ground, we see Kuchar from below, walking over the camera and into the distance. His pretense that he is just out for a walk, unaware of the camera, is amusing—and an implicit comment on similar gestures in Hollywood movies (one thinks of John Ford's stagecoaches and wagons driving over cameras during skirmishes with Indians).[20]

The meta-narrative of the Weather Diary series also charts Kuchar's increasing openness about his autoeroticism. He mentions that he "beats his meat" in *Weather Diary 1*, but in subsequent diaries he's more open about masturbating (in *Weather Diary 3* we see him masturbating in the shower) and about his homoerotic desire: in *Weather Diary 4* and *Weather Diary 5* his desire for young men is obvious; and in *Weather Diary 6* a male lover visits. There are also formal evolutions within the series (for instance, after using synch sound for *Weather Diary 1* through *5*, Kuchar returns, in *Weather Diary 6*, to a non-synch approach reminiscent of *Wild Night in El Reno*) and formal jokes on this evolution. *Weather Diary 8: Interior Vacuum* (1992) begins as a tour of San Francisco homes that seems to have nothing to do with the weather or the Weather Diaries, but during a birthday celebration at the second home, Kuchar's gift is his new Weather Diary, which we subsequently see.

In the end, Kuchar's self-reflexive documentation of a performance of the personal can be read as a parallel to an aspect of *Walden* and of Olmsted's Yosemite report. Thoreau may have gone to the woods "because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived," but his stay at Walden Pond was *also* research for the book on which his reputation rests most firmly. He may have been literally earning his living "by the labor of my hands only," but he was storing up experiences that he would subsequently craft—"by hand," in a different sense—into a literary work.[20] Similarly, Olmsted may have believed that sites like Yosemite might be of inestimable value in reenergizing the psyches of those who visited because, unlike workaday life (which is devoted to what *will* happen), an experience of nature "is for itself and at the moment it is enjoyed. The attention is aroused and the mind occupied without purpose, without . . . relating the present action . . . to some future end."[21] But his own exploration of Yosemite was part of his work, a means to both a larger end in general and to a government report in particular. Both Thoreau and Olmsted used the idea of escape from their parts in the process of industrialization, of "civilization," as a means of energizing their careers. Similarly, it is clear in the first of the Weather Diaries, and is confirmed by those that have followed, that when Kuchar travels to El Reno, he is going into video production. Kuchar comes to El Reno to experience the sublimity of the weather and to produce a video about his experience. Indeed, *Weather Diary 1* was shot entirely in-camera. Kuchar fabricated his continuity as he shot, and when he left El Reno, the video was complete.[22] Kuchar has found a way to use Thoreau's and Olmsted's insights within a thoroughly developed, mediated world, reinvigorating the idea of the beautiful and sublime without needing to frame the vernacular world out. Kuchar's is a sublimity J. B. Jackson might appreciate.

Two Spins on Americanism

Which brings us back around to *Twister*. Within the context of the modern discourse around the issue of what "America" *is*, both *Twister* and Kuchar's Weather Diaries can be seen as quintessentially American, but in two different senses, which, however, contextualize each other. *Twister* is "American," even in addition to its reiteration of the rhetoric of the American action/adventure genre, and its romanticization both of the sublimity of nature *and* of technology. The characters' romance with "Dorothy" is reflected by the filmmakers' romance with special effects, and of course, both levels of this romance with technology come together at the climax of *Twister* by means of the most prevalent romantic technology of the 1990s, the computer. *Twister*'s computer-generated effects create the F-5 tornado that sucks "Dorothy" into the funnel and produces a world of new data on the storm-chasers' computer system. On both levels, technology is in the process of supplanting Nature's sublimity. "Dorothy" will render tornados less dangerous to people, and Industrial Light and Magic's twister technology not only produces imagery as convincing as live recording, it can generate virtual mega-twisters at will and send them wherever the filmmakers decide they should go.

In the Weather Diaries, Kuchar is equally "American," in the particular nature of his *resistance* to technological development. Unlike the storm-chasers in *Twister* and the special effects masters at Industrial Light and Magic, Kuchar's goal is not total control, but a reinvigoration of the beautiful and the sublime within his everyday experience and the various benefits this reinvigoration can produce. That Kuchar is making a videotape is clear evidence that he is not anti-technology. But whereas the direction of technological development in/of *Twister* is centripetal (like the movement of air in a tornado), focusing increased power and money in the hands of a few people, the technological development represented by Kuchar is centrifugal: it argues for a dispersion of media power, a more media-democratic awareness of people, and a far broader sensitivity to the particular natural realities within which we live. At personal appearances, Kuchar explains that the production cost of *Weather Diary 1* was eleven dollars (the cost of the videotape itself), and even if we argue that the cost of living in El Reno should also be included, Kuchar's expenses were minimal: the Reno Motel room rented for sixty dollars a week! In recent years, Kuchar has travelled the country, training would-be videomakers in "Very Low Budget Video Production" (to quote a 1996 Southeastern Media Institute brochure). Kuchar is a magician, but in a very different sense from Hollywood special effects people. They spend millions producing realistic illusions of what we know isn't true, both literally and metaphorically (in recent generations we've certainly learned that technological advance alone won't save us), while Kuchar uses media to reconnect us with everyday realities that we know are the stuff of our lives as individuals and as Americans, and to model the production of personal video responses to our experiences that we can share with one another. Like many independent film and video artists, Kuchar means to provide democratic balance to viewers swept up in the whirlwind of technological development by using new technology to work against the winds of change and especially the centripetal accumulation of media power.

Scott MacDonald interviews independent filmmakers for the Critical Cinema Series, published by the University of California Press; he has just finished *The Garden in the Machine*, a book of essays exploring the depiction of (mostly American) landscape and cityscape in a range of independent films and videos.

Notes

1. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984, p. xii.
2. The classic overview of nineteenth-century landscape painting is Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), though Angela Miller's *The Empire of the Eye* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1993) should also be consulted. While Thomas Cole and Frederic Church were the most influential nineteenth-century landscape painters, and while Church, more than anyone else, was responsible for establishing the "Grand Picture"—the large canvas depicting the immensity of American landscape—the two painters most consistently devoted to painting Great Pictures of the American West are Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, both of whom have been the subject of major retrospectives in recent years. See Nancy K. Anderson and Linda S. Ferber, *Albert Bierstadt: Art and Enterprise*, the catalogue for the Bierstadt retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum in 1991; and Nancy K. Anderson, *Thomas Moran*, the catalogue for the Moran retrospective at the National Gallery of Art in Washington in 1997–98.
3. New York: Knopf, 1995. Schama focuses on the myth of original nature so crucial in Polish, German, British, French, and American history—especially in its deployment in wars of cultural conquest and resistance.
4. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, p. 8.
5. In *Twister*, "F-5" is identified as a number 5 tornado on the Fujita Scale for measuring the power of tornados.
6. Bill's "genius" is for predicting weather; he can feel and smell, *knows* what a tornado will do (early in *Twister* he is framed, next to an American flag, outdoors, alone, receiving communications directly from the atmosphere). He

is the modern version of Natty Bumppo, the individualistic, nineteenth-century guide into the frontier wilderness.

7. Edmund Burke's distinction between "the sublime" and "the beautiful" (in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, first published in 1757) has been much discussed during the past two centuries. As Barbara Novak explains it, "The late-eighteenth-century sublime . . . was associated with fear, gloom, and majesty" (*Nature and Culture*, p. 34), while the "beautiful" represented the more balanced, controlled forms of aesthetic experience emblemized by classic Greek architecture.

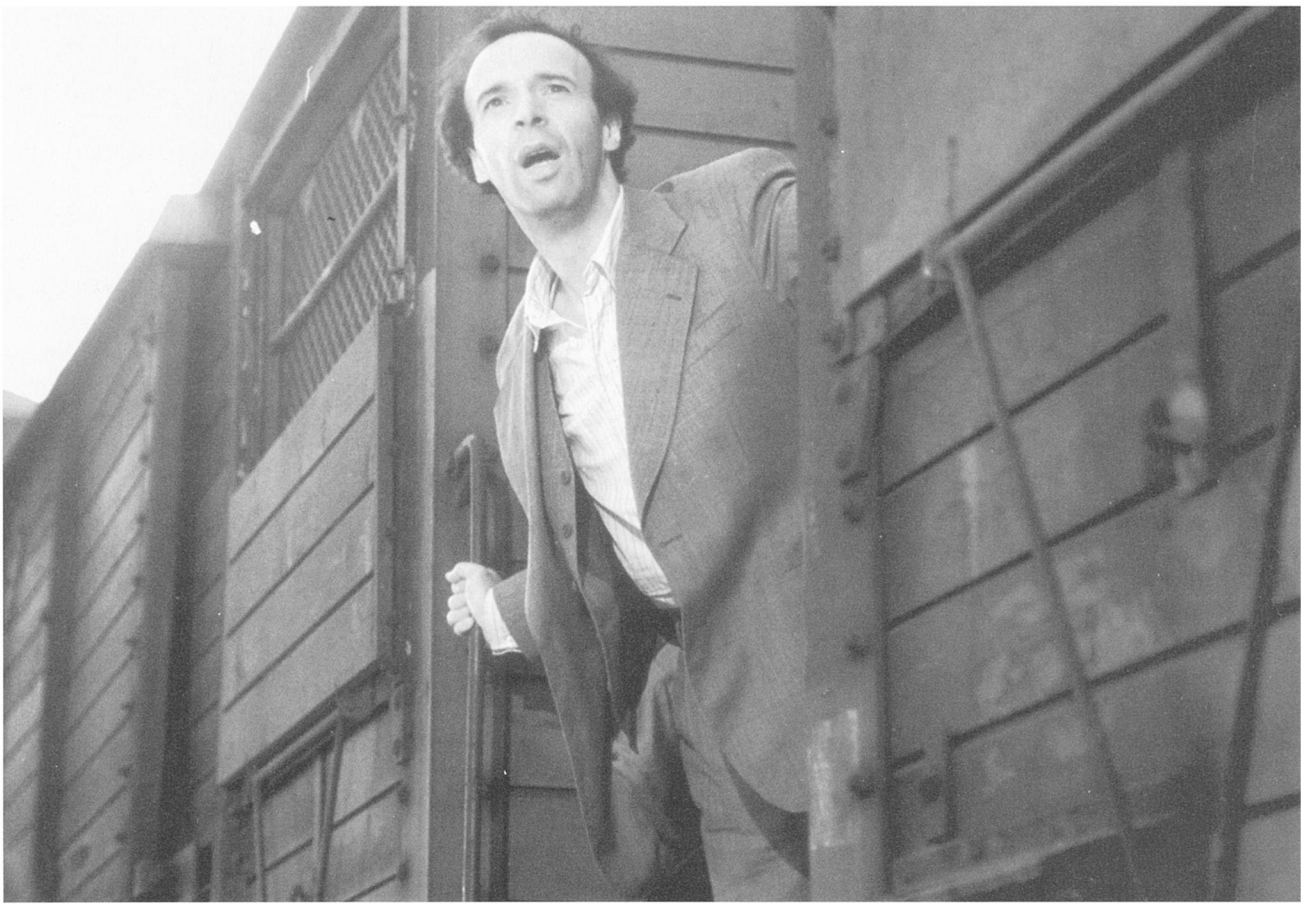
   A particularly clear and useful overview of the history of the sublime, including many of the central texts that have contributed to this discourse, begins David E. Nye's *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994). See chapters 1, 2.
8. For a contemporary review of early Kuchar screenings, see Jonas Mekas, *Movie Journal* (New York: Collier, 1972), pp. 122–26, 166–67. J. Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum discuss the Kuchars' importance to the sixties Underground scene and their influence in *Midnight Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1983).

   That the early Kuchar films had an impact is clear in John Waters' introduction to the Kuchar Brothers' new book, *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (Berkeley, CA: Zanja Press, 1997), edited by Mary Pacios. Waters begins, "George and Mike Kuchar's films were my first inspiration. George's *Hold Me While I'm Naked* (1996), Mike's *Sins of the Fleshapoids* (1966) were the pivotal films of my youth, bigger influences than Warhol, Kenneth Anger, even *The Wizard of Oz*" (i).
9. Kuchar talked with me about the early 8mm melodramas in *A Critical Cinema* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 297–316. In a more recent interview, Kuchar mentions that he has been interested in weather since he was very young, and that artist Eric Sloane was important to him: see Sloane's *Look at the Sky and Tell the Weather* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1961). Kuchar's first job was doing graphics for New York City television weatherman, Frank Field. See Scott MacDonald, "Storm Chaser," an interview with George Kuchar, *The Independent* (July 1997), p. 40. I was alerted to this early fascination with weather by Margaret Morse's discussion "Cyclones from Oz: on George Kuchar's *Weather Diary 1*" in *The Essayistic in Film and Video*, a catalogue for a 1989 San Francisco exhibition of film and video.
10. *Hold Me While I'm Naked* seems to owe a good deal to Hitchcock's *Psycho*, one of the pivotal films for a good many young people in 1960 (when Kuchar was 18). If, in retrospect, we see Norman Bates as suggesting Hitchcock's conflicts about women, conflicts that sometimes led to the director's sexually harassing actresses (see Donald Spoto's comments about Hitchcock's relationship with Vera Miles in *The Dark Side of Genius: The Life of Alfred Hitchcock* [New York: Ballantine, 1983], pp. 408–9), the director in Kuchar's film—who lives with his mother, dresses up in women's clothing, and is obsessed with shower scenes—reflects Kuchar's self-awareness (and his utter openness about it) that part of the lure of becoming a film director is the opportunity to work with voluptuous women and, at times, to see them undressed and to have power over them.
11. Though *Wild Night in El Reno* is the most obvious formal predecessor of the Weather Diaries, several earlier melodramas, including *A Reason to Live* and *Back to Nature* (both made the year before *Wild Night in El Reno*) are relevant. In both films, nature becomes a curative for distress and dislocation. In *A Reason to Live*, for example, the protagonist (played by the late Curt McDowell, a frequent Kuchar collaborator) reads the book *Oklahoma Weather* and leaves San Francisco to go to Oklahoma, where he is apparently killed in a tornado.
12. This listing and an accompanying press kit are available at the Video Data Bank at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 112 S. Michigan Ave., Suite 312, Chicago, IL 60603; (312)-345-3550; Fax: (312)-541-8073.
13. Since 1990, the Weather Diaries have tended to be considerably shorter: *Weather Watch* (*Weather Diary 7*, 1991) is 16 minutes; *Interior Vacuum* (*Weather Diary 8*), 19 minutes; *Sunbelt Serenade* (*Weather Diary 9*, 1993), 17 minutes; *Route 666* (*Weather Diary 10*, 1994), 7 3/4 minutes; *George, Pepe, and Pancho* (*Weather Diary 11*, 1995), 13 1/4 minutes; *Season of Sorrow* (*Weather Diary 12*, 1996), 12 1/4 minutes. The Weather Diary series seems to be petering out, though vestiges remain in *The Inmate* (1997) and *Chigger Country* (1999).
14. Thoreau in *Walden*, edited by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 36.
15. Thoreau's famous statement, "I have travelled a good deal in Concord," is one of the more obvious of the many indications that Thoreau was reacting against the assumption that "real" exploration can only be achieved in remote regions. Another is from *The Maine Woods*: "We have advanced by leaps to the Pacific, and left many a lesser Oregon and California unexplored behind us." (New York: Penguin, 1988, p. 111.)
16. Thoreau in *Walden*, edited by J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 36.
17. For Kuchar's versions of this Flaherty experience, see the video *Vermin of the Vortex* (1966), where Kuchar is captured by aliens and is taken to the Flaherty to be experimented on; "The Big Stink" in *Reflections from a Cinematic Cesspool* (pp. 108–20), where Kuchar details the experience in his own inimitable prose; and MacDonald, "Storm Chaser," pp. 38–42.
18. Kuchar's awareness of the history of the El Reno area has developed over the years. During the Oklahoma land rush of 1889, El Reno was one of the taking-off locations. In fact, part of Ron Howard's *Far and Away* (1992) was filmed in El Reno.
19. Olmsted, in "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees: A Preliminary Report" (1865) by Frederick Law Olmsted, reconstructed and published for the first time by Laura Wood Roper, *Landscape Architecture*, no. 43 (October 1952), pp. 17, 22.
20. Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 90, 3.
21. Olmsted, p. 20.
22. Kuchar's video camera allows him a flexibility that 16mm filmmaking (or even 8mm or Super-8mm) does not. He can do basic intercutting and sound-image arrangement, and see the results immediately. Subsequent video diaries were substantially complete when Kuchar left Oklahoma, though he fine-tuned them later, sometimes adding special effects. Paul Arthur explores some of the differences between Kuchar as filmmaker and Kuchar as videomaker in "History and Cross Consciousness: George Kuchar's Fantasies of Un-power," *Millennium Film Journal*, Nos. 20–21 (Fall-Winter 1988–89), pp. 151–58.

Maurizio Viano

Life Is Beautiful

Reception, Allegory, and Holocaust Laughter



Roberto Benigni in *Life Is Beautiful*

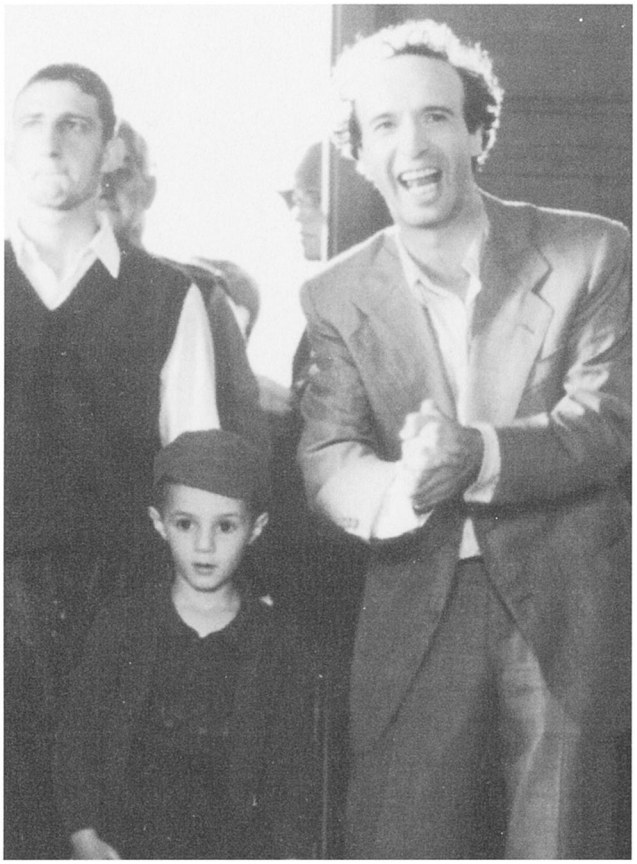
Natasha has just come up to the window from the courtyard and opened it wider so that the air may enter more freely into my room. I can see the bright green strip of grass beneath the wall, and the clear blue sky above the wall, and sunlight everywhere. Life is beautiful. Let the future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence, and enjoy it to the full.
—Leon Trotsky

In a 1987 essay entitled "Holocaust Laughter," Terrence Des Pres notes that "one of the surprising characteristics of the film *Shoah* is how often Claude Lanzmann and some of his witnesses take up a sardonic tone, a kind of mocking irony that on occasion comes close to laughter." (279) Observing that Lanzmann "seems deliberate about it," Des Pres concludes that "if *Shoah* is a sign of the times, we may suppose that artistic representation of the Holocaust is changing—that it is trying a more flexible mode of response." (280) Ten years later, two films would prove his uncanny intuition right: Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* and Radu Mihaileanu's *Train of Life*.[1] Whereas the latter has not thus far raised much controversy, *Life Is Beautiful* has been and is the focus of unbridled media attention, enormous popular success, surprising industry recognition (in the Oscars awarded to Roberto Begnini), and some astonishing critical venom.

The Award for the Best Jewish Experience, obtained by Benigni's daring project at the Jerusalem International Film Festival in 1998, is truly "a blasphemy," for "the Holocaust misrepresentations of *Life Is Beautiful*" are "unforgivably obscene"; but "there are further horrors beyond the movie: ahistoric film critics who slaver over it, fuzzy-thinking crowds who embrace it," and favorable Jewish re/viewers "who definitely should know better." Thus ends Gerald Peary's review in the *Boston Phoenix*, leaving those who "don't have the honor of being Jewish" with no choice but feeling intimidated.[2] That moral intimidation is Peary's strategy is clear from his review's opening move: "Peary? My family name was Pisarevsky, changed at Ellis Island by American officials. My parents are Russian-born Jews. What you see below is, I suppose, an angry Jewish column." Peary's anger, however, is less cognitive than rhetorical, a justification for dismissing the film and its author while feeling good about it. Peary even calls Benigni, whose father spent two years in a Nazi labor camp, a "revisionist."[3]

Peary's is but the extreme case in a series of negative reviews that appeared in several major publications (e.g., the *Village Voice*, *Time*, and *The New Republic*) upon the film's release in the U.S.[4] Their dismissal of *Life Is Beautiful* often adopts Peary's strategy of moral indignation. Only J. Hoberman, in the *Voice*, attempted a reading of the film, his anger being a cognitive tool that produces textual knowledge rather than moral outcry. Consistent with his premises, he drags Spielberg along with Benigni into the mud, for "it was *Schindler's List* that made mass extermination safe for mass consumption."

However, the existence of a very large number of non-angry Jewish re/viewers belies the assumption that being Jewish should automatically lead to hating *Life Is Beautiful*. Abraham Foxman, director of the Anti-Defamation League, was approached by leaders of the Italian-Jewish community concerned by and divided on *Life Is Beautiful*. Before viewing it, Foxman



Giorgio Cantarini and Benigni

remarked that a comic film set in Auschwitz "cannot be done, [it] is trivializing."-(Kotzin 44) He changed his mind afterwards: "The film is so poignant, it is so sensitive, it is so informed by creative genius, that the answer is—I give it a wholehearted endorsement." (Kotzin 45) Likewise, in the *Jerusalem Report*, Daniel Kotzin argued, "Throughout, Benigni is walking the thinnest of lines—taking the risk in almost every camp scene of lapsing into the offensive, of cheapening his subject. It would take only one false note, one poorly judged wisecrack, to destroy the delicate fabric. Yet extraordinarily—the more so, given Benigni's madcap movie-star persona—there are no slips, the poignant balance is maintained." (41)

Lest we too believe, with Peary, that Jews favorable to the film "should know better," attitudes towards *Life Is Beautiful* depend less on whether you're Jewish or Gentile than on other factors. In most cases, appreciation of *Life Is Beautiful* is made difficult, if not impossible, by the presence of an obstacle that often goes unremarked. To understand the nature of this obstacle, let us look at the group constituted by all those who write or talk about films from a position of some authority, from local or campus paper reviewers to academic scholars and highbrow critics. An examination of the critical judgments on *Life Is Beautiful*, conventionally framed within a low-, middle-, and highbrow hierarchy, reveals that, within the limits inherent in all generalizations, the higher the re/viewer's position the more negative the re/view. A case in point is what happened in Boston and New York. The two major newspapers, the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, wrote about the film in enthusiastic terms. The weekly "cultural" magazines aiming at more sophisticated readers, the *Boston Phoenix* and the *Village Voice*, panned it. Likewise, most of the film scholars that I have interviewed either shrugged their shoulders or expressed contempt. Students, on the other hand, were enthusiastic, and so were several academics from disciplines other than Film Studies (including Jewish Studies). We are faced, then, with an obstacle that does not affect popular or non-specialized audiences and those who negotiate film ratings for them, an obstacle to which middle- to highbrow film authorities are more vulnerable. This is not surprising, for the obstacle belongs to the slippery terrain that the French sociologist Bourdieu ascribes to habitus as "the incorporated form of one's class position and the conditionings imposed by it," i.e., taste. (112) Taking *Life Is Beautiful* seriously goes against high cultural taste.

Taste, Bourdieu never tires of repeating, is economic *and* cultural capital made body. Academic film scholars and highbrow critics (people like Peary and me) usually belong to "the fractions (relatively) richest in cultural capital and (relatively) poorest in economic capital." Artistic consumption is for us one of the most distinctive sociocultural practices. It yields distinction in the form of symbolic profit/status *and* distinguishes us from those who don't know better. By displaying refined tastes in the arts, we constantly (re)define and (re)position ourselves.

> What is at stake is indeed "personality," i.e., the quality of the person which is affirmed in the capacity to appropriate an object of quality. The objects endowed with the greatest distinctive power are those which most clearly attest *the quality of their appropriation*, that is the quality of those who appropriate them, because their appropriation demands time and skills that, insofar as they require a long investment of time—like musical or pictorial culture—cannot be acquired in haste or by proxy, and which therefore appear as the surest indications of the intrinsic qualities of the person." (319–20)

We tend therefore to valorize those films whose consumption indicates that we do not fall for the temptations of the entertainment industry (sentimentalism, media-hype, easy-to-understand plots, immediate pleasures). To complicate things further, we do not appreciate being reminded of all this, as if acknowledging the social function of our cultural habits diminished their value. Our tastes, choices, and reactions must appear to be the result of freedom, talent, and intelligence rather than sociocultural logic, apprenticeship, and privilege.

Benigni's physical comic style has little potential for yielding such distinction. In Italy, his films do have a mass following, but they are commonly shunned by "serious" critics. Indeed, dignified aloofness typifies high culture's reception of Benigni's films. For example, the intellectually sophisticated Italian film journal *Duel* did not offer a substantive reading of *Life Is Beautiful* (which they had done for *Titanic*). Likewise, in France, the prestigious *Cahiers du Cinéma* refused to give *Life Is Beautiful* even the negative recognition of an attack, as testified by Thierry Jousse's report from Cannes: "A totally disproportioned Jury's special Grand Prize for Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful*, which deserves neither its detractors' angered, grand moral declarations nor the excessive praise of its supporters, who unhesitatingly compare it to Chaplin (!)." (23)

Convinced that "laughter can save us," Benigni resents comedy's ancillary role.

Benigni is aware of this situation, the product, after all, of the choice he made when he developed a "popular" comic style (*comicità popolare*). Drawing a distinction between humor and "the comic," he likens them, respectively, to eroticism and pornography, and jokingly declares himself a pornographer, too physical and unsophisticated to please refined spirits. (Benigni, www1)[5] Much as he may seem at peace with the populism of his comedies, Benigni has now and then manifested his resentment at the way in which his films are rigidly typecast as "low." Interviews with him are filled with high cultural references that often surface in his films. In fact, his respect for and increasing appropriation of a traditional cultural capital (e.g., his 1998 public readings in Florence, Rome, and New York of Dante's *Inferno*) betray his anxiety over the seemingly impossible promotion of his comedies to a higher status. Benigni's desire for a higher status is less a symptom of ambition than of a genuine wish that his ideas on comedy and laughter be taken seriously. Convinced that "laughter can save us," Benigni resents comedy's ancillary role (press kit 21). His latest films aim to bestow legitimacy on comedy by reframing topical issues through the subversive lens of laughter. With *Johnny Stecchino* (1991), for example, he confronted one of Italy's worst scourges, the Mafia. (According to Umberto Eco, Benigni's satire of a Mafioso's masculinity was an effective deterrent against the fascination that the gangster image exerts on young men—more effective than the countless realistic films made on the subject. [author's personal recollection]) In *Il Mostro* (*The Monster*, 1994) , his depiction of a petty thief mistaken for a serial rapist was in many ways a regression to his earlier style of predominantly sexual jokes. On that occasion, Benigni spoke of "the big challenge of transforming a dramatic subject into a comedy." (Benigni, www2) *Life Is Beautiful* constitutes Benigni's attempt to maximize this challenge and prove his comedies' potential once and for all: "I had this strong desire to put myself, my comic persona, in an extreme situation"; and "the ultimate extreme situation is the extermination camp, almost the symbol of our century, the negative one, the worst thing imaginable." (Stanley 44) The Holocaust then is not an end but a means—"I did not want to make a film about the Holocaust" (Stanley 45)—the means to prove that (his type of) comedy can treat the Holocaust respectfully *and* suggest an outlook that tragedy is unequipped to convey. It should be noted here that Benigni's project, far from cheapening it, confirms the Holocaust as history's worst nightmare and reinscribes it in the collective memory through an unusual code.

A profound historical and cultural awareness sustains the script.[6] Take the title, for example. The film's working title was "Buongiorno Principessa!," a tribute to the phrase which first introduces Guido's (the protagonist, played by Roberto Benigni) mythopoetic power to the audience. During postproduction, Benigni came across the statement "Life is beautiful" in Trotsky's letters, written when the Jewish Communist leader, in the seclusion of his Mexican bunker, already knew that his days were numbered. Trotsky's words immediately resonated with the spirit that animates *Life Is Beautiful*, and became the definitive title. As such, it operates on multiple levels. In everyday language, the expression *Dai! La vita è bella!* (Come on! Life is beautiful!) is often employed to cheer someone up—it asks us to look at the causes of our despair from a broader perspective. "Life is beautiful" functions on a cinematic level as well, for it links Benigni's film with Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* and the optimism for which the Italian-American director is (in)famous.

Moreover, unlike "Buongiorno Principessa!," the new title has no apparent diegetic justification, puzzles viewers, and forces them to ask questions. Benigni was certainly aware that, while nobody would recognize the reference to Trotsky, the title "Life Is Beautiful" would expose the film to further critical venom—"Can you imagine anyone who actually survived the camps saying that?" predictably asks Peary. Had Benigni wished to soften the prejudice and suspicion that a film portrayed by the media as "a Holocaust comedy" understandably aroused, he would have kept the original title. Evidently, artistic criteria took priority over marketing diplomacy.

Ironically, those who can make the most out of the new title—highbrow film critics and/or academic scholars—seem uninterested in doing so because their attention lies elsewhere. Benigni's efforts are likely to go unnoticed since, superficially, *Life Is Beautiful* has all the qualities that most film academics despise. Their habitual distaste for Benigni's slapstick is exacerbated by the film's popular success and by the feel-good, Capraesque humanism that oozes from nearly all favorable reviews (e.g., "a dazzling exposition of the way in which love, tenderness and humor can sustain the human spirit under the most oppressive circumstances"). (Kotzin 40) Add to this the sentimentalism inherent in the story of a father with his innocent child in a death camp: it's an emotional terrorism that works for "them" (the popular audience), but not for "us." And if the obstacles of physical comedy, sentimentalism, and media hype were not enough, *Life Is Beautiful* is, also, not "beautiful." Benigni is not the type of director to astonish with sweeping camera movements, against-the-beat editing, non-narrative detours. His films are not for those who value style over content, difficulty over simplicity.

It is my contention that Benigni's unsuitability to highbrow taste prevented, prevents, and will prevent most highbrow critics and film scholars from taking *Life Is Beautiful* seriously. Which is too bad. If they did, they would discover what I myself was able to discover in the wake of a fortuitous event that confirms the legitimacy of my hypothesis—I know all about the intellectual bias against Benigni's *vis comica* because I had it myself.

When I was invited to be the guest speaker at a preview screening of *Life Is Beautiful*, I hesitated. Much as I respected Benigni's longstanding militancy as political satirist, I was no fan of his movies. Luckily, however, I accepted, and set out to do my homework: articles, interviews, and multiple viewings of the videotape. My first impression was skeptical and had it not been for my responsibilities, I would not have watched it again. But I did, and, as every film scholar knows, it is the second viewing that tells "the truth" about a film. Released from the duty of following the plot and from the pressure of laughing at gags unsuited to my taste, I began appreciating *Life Is Beautiful*'s quotes, internal rhymes, and intertextual links. An allegorical structure of sorts was emerging. And, far from cheapening the Holocaust, the film prodded me to know more.

You can't show unimaginable horror—you can only ever show less than what it was.

A few people I know joked about how they went to see the much-talked about, touching film about a child in the Holocaust, and after half an hour asked themselves, "Did I go to the wrong theater?" With the exception of two premonitions (immediately defused by Guido's optimistic and childishly naive nature) the first hour of *Life Is Beautiful* is pure farce and fairy tale romance, with no hint of the impending tragedy. Inevitably, detractors hissed that the first half betrays the director's real interests—making people laugh—and proves his facile approach to Jewish reality. Undoubtedly, the optimistic Guido is *not* a realistic portrait of the average Italian Jew in 1939. But even more unrealistic is his son Giosuè (Giorgio Cantarini) hiding out in his father's concentration camp barrack, or the cryptic image of prisoners carrying anvils all day.[7] Everything in this fairy tale is unrealistic, or, better, has no verisimilitude. If we go to see *Life Is Beautiful* expecting verisimilitude, we are in the wrong theater. That even sophisticated critics, normally suspicious of the realistic expectations typical of mass audiences, resorted to criticizing the film on the basis of its violations of credibility, proves the extent to which Benigni's parable asked them to do what they were unwilling to do: treat *Life Is Beautiful* as if it had been directed by someone they respect. To many, of course, the Holocaust allows for no artistic license; its depiction must obey the rules of tragic realism—the only mode/mood commonly held fit for fictions on a reality that vastly surpassed fiction. But "according to what I read, saw and felt in the victims' accounts, I realized that nothing in a film could even come close to the reality of what happened. You can't show unimaginable horror—you can only ever show less than what it was. So I did not want audiences to look for realism in my movie." (press kit 19)

In fact, *Life Is Beautiful intentionally* conceals Guido's Jewishness for about 45 minutes and rids the film's first half of tragedy. Benigni's choice emphasizes an uncontested historical reality—the "Italian-ness" of the Jews, their participation in Italian history at all levels. The storehouse that Guido's uncle Eliseo (Giustino Durano) lends to Guido and his friend Ferruccio has a bed on which Garibaldi, *the* symbol of the Italian unification process, allegedly slept. Eliseo also mentions an original manuscript of one of Petrarch's biographies—Francesco Petrarca being the name of the school in which a Fascist official is to explain the Race Manifesto (a quasi-"scientific" argument for the existence of an Aryan race which concluded that since Jews were not Aryan they therefore could not be true Italians) and where Guido/Benigni gives us a funny *and* intelligent satire of racism's arbitrariness.

Until the late 1930s, Italian Jews lived, loved, and laughed like anyone else in Italy. Anti-Semitism did not enter official Fascist ideology until race laws went into effect in 1938 (Mussolini himself had a Jewish mistress until 1936). "The vast majority of assimilated and non-political Italian Jews reacted to the racial laws with shock and disbelief," reports Susan Zuccotti in what has been called the definitive study of the Holocaust in Italy. (43) Although "every Italian Jew was affected," (43) the situation was far from being homogeneous. There was even the case of Fascist Jews who blamed the race laws on Zionism and non-patriotic Jews. (Stille 17–90) Many Jews downplayed discrimination as a symptom of Mussolini's opportunism which was aimed to win Hitler's favor and create the possibility of forfeiture of assets as well as bribes and corruption Italian style. ("On July 13, 1939, the government introduced an Aryanization program, by which a special commission could simply declare arbitrarily that a Jew was not a Jew." [39]) In this tragic farce, Guido's oblivious optimism constitutes an absurd response to an absurd reality.

The intentional creation of an optimistic Jew who averts his eyes from the signs of impending tragedy is more than a reflection on the advantages of dis-identity. It serves architectural reasons. By refusing to make Guido and his uncle Eliseo icons of a foretold disaster, the film lets comedy reign supreme throughout the first half. Cleverly, something similar, but opposite, happens in the second. Shortly after the prisoners arrive the camp, we have the film's funniest scene—Guido "translates" for his son's benefit the camp regulations, transforming brutal commands into elaborate rules (for survival, in fact, or, as it seems to Giosuè, for winning a grand prize) and the camp guard into one of the game's "mean guys." It is the beginning of the "game." It is also the end of the film's *vis comica*, and we practically stop laughing. "In the second half, there's only one joke, the game," commented an academic friend of mine. He meant it as a criticism. While agreeing with his observation, I do not regard it as a flaw—quite the contrary. The lack of jokes is, of course, a sign of Benigni's respectful restraint. But letting go of comedy's prime objective—laughter—serves architectural reasons. It purifies, as it were, the second half, so that tears replace laughter, fear replaces optimism. *Life Is Beautiful* has a remarkable architecture because it creates a filmic space that is virtually symmetrical.

It is, however, a weird symmetry. Far from producing the sense of balance and comforting harmony traditionally associated with it, symmetry here disorients viewers by forcing them to experience the anxiety of an unexpected schizophrenic attack. *Life Is Beautiful* splices together two halves that are, in fact, recalcitrant opposites, one the negation of the other: slapstick comedy and tragedy. The legitimacy of the film's aspirations to be treated seriously starts here, in the deliberate and uncommon short-circuiting of two modes of representation that may tolerate, and even profit by, mixing, but cannot be merely juxtaposed without seeing their identities and effects unpredictably altered. *Life Is Beautiful* is not just tragi-comic but it is *first* comic and *then* tragic. There is quite a difference between thinking of a film as a mixture of comedy and tragedy, the tragi-comic, or as a juxtaposition of two symmetrical and mutually negating spaces. The former is a healthy if occasionally disturbing mix, aiming, as a rule, to either make comedy serious by bestowing gravity on its lightness, or, conversely, to defuse the depression provoked by tragedy. The latter is uncanny and unsettling, potentially sickening and always disorienting, insofar as spectators are forced into a schizoid experience. In a sense, *Life Is Beautiful* successfully helps its viewers to imagine what many Italian Jews must have felt, the eruption of absurdity and the transformation of one reality into its opposite. This is how *Life Is Beautiful* is faithful to reality—it dramatizes its deepest implications. It is faithful to reality in spirit and not in the letter.

I propose to look at the film's formal arrangement as a spatio-temporal allegory. Spatially, the two opposites are kept separate and yet overdetermine one another, a bit like the Yin-Yang symbol, where the black and the white are well defined and symmetrically juxtaposed, but each contains a speck of the other as a memento of their interdependence. Temporally, as Benigni himself reminds us through a humorous pun that works

only in Italian, we are reminded of the devastating wisdom of the Old Testament's most mysteriously modern book, the *Qohelet*: "A time to laugh, a time to cry."[8] *Life Is Beautiful*'s architectural schizophrenia suggests the irreconcilable duality in human history.

Seen in the light of the film's architectural allegory, both ending and beginning deserve attention. The ending seems to repropose schizophrenia by first violating and then upholding the rules of comedy. Predictably, detractors concentrated only on the happy half, on the "many, many from his camp (too many) who survived" and who "seem immediately happy." (Peary) True, there is a sunny feeling about the last few minutes of the film, but it cannot be seen in isolation from the fact that Guido, the protagonist of what is perceived as a comedy, dies. And the *abbiamo vinto!* (we won!) at the end of *Life Is Beautiful* is not the happy ending that seals a trivialized Holocaust—it is the griefstricken cry of triumph with which a people marked for extinction transformed their darkest hour into a new beginning.

The paradox of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more *active* response.

The film's beginning is retrospectively so revealing that viewers should be forced to see it again after the end. The credits flash on the images in an unusually slow and unpredictable manner, and cover three sequences. In the first, we get a shot of Guido, in a camp uniform, walking with his son asleep in his arms. Fog makes vision difficult and a voiceover reminds us that the film we're about to see is a fairy tale (and therefore demands the suspension of the rules of realism). As if to make sure that we don't miss the prescription of fabulous semiotic lenses, the word fairy tale is uttered twice in the space of one short sentence. Also, (Italian) viewers are immediately aware that the voiceover is not Benigni's. Whose is it then? Only by the film's very end, in the scene of the "many, many, too many" survivors in the sun, do we find out that the voiceover is Giosuè's, Guido's son, who then retrospectively becomes the narrator of the film. *Life Is Beautiful* is the grateful recollection of a son who commemorates his father's sacrifice in a spirit that would have pleased him.

Giosuè's voiceover begins and ends the film, imparting a circular shape to it. But the first shot's pivotal function extends beyond the voiceover. It is also a flash forward, for, some twenty minutes before the end, we return to the same shot. Walking with Giosue in his arms, Guido mutters to himself, "What if this were nothing but a dream?" And immediately we get a POV-shot of a heap of corpses: what looked like fog is in fact smoke from incinerated bodies. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine a more effective way of making the first sequence resonate with the rest of the film.

The second sequence contains, barely disguised in the sudden eruption of freewheeling slapstick, a ritual invocation to the creative muses and another prescriptive gesture. The scene per se is unfunny, a predictable brake failure in a car speeding downhill. In the allegorical scheme, it draws a tempting analogy between the zig-zagging vehicle containing the author and the film itself. The image of a car without brakes that cuts through the fields downhill, however silly, is then at once the material support of a slapstick routine (it has, in other words, a diegetic role) and an apt allegorization of the text as an intoxicated/intoxicating fairy tale that will stray not only from the rules of realism but also from those of fairy tales themselves.

The third sequence shows Guido's accidental encounter with his Princess-to-be, Dora (Nicoletta Braschi), and offers the first example of what is in fact the true common thread uniting the two halves, the one thing capable of running through both "the comic" and "the tragic," that is, the game. The game does not start in the camp, it starts with the courtship of Dora—hence the film's working title "Buongiorno Principessa!" The game is the ability to transform each event into another story, the possibility that what happens in the unfolding narrative called reality may have another meaning in the make-believe text spun by Guido's imagination.

The game opened by "Buongiorno Principessa!" consists then in the art of living life as if it were an allegory to which our imagination can provide the key. Each occurrence can be lived in its humdrum, material significance, and/or it can also be seen as the indication of another text. When Guido calls out "Maria!" and a much-needed house key drops from a window as if by magic, he is successfully superimposing his own mythical story onto normal, everyday events. By saying "Buongiorno Principessa," he spellbinds Dora into believing that she too is part of a fairy tale. "Buongiorno Principessa" is the invitation to enter a mythical world in which our life overflows with secret connections and possibilities within our reach, provided that we awaken to them.

The game, then, has a name: spirituality. Spirituality, of any kind, is going to demand a similar move

from you: that you stop thinking that our life has only one dimension/reading. You can reject the game/spirituality, and roast and boast in the material world; or you can conceive the possibility that everything that happens here and now, in history, can be wrenched away from a narrative that is increasingly devoid of sense, and can be grafted onto another story, another realm. Indeed, our take on the game depends on our willingness to take seriously the sudden eruption of spiritual needs that characterizes this end of the millennium: Where do we stand? And the question of *Life Is Beautiful*'s alleged revisionism should be thus reformulated: Is it morally legitimate, when representing the Holocaust, to suggest that spirituality provides the key to unlock the camps' doors? The game is also at one with the fairy tale—or better, the game consists in being able to live your life as if it were a fairy tale, a mythical world populated by gods and monsters. The Holocaust was the result of Nazi terror and Judeo-Christian history; but it was also the possession of some humans by the very demons they had unleashed. It is not a matter of choosing one reading instead of the other—both explain what happened. That's what life as an allegory means. That is why *Life Is Beautiful*'s fairy tale can lift us from the Holocaust—not because the Holocaust has been cheapened but because our spirit has been enlarged. And furthermore, as a fairy tale, *Life Is Beautiful* is itself an enactment of the game. Benigni's film is the dream that comedic imagination triggers in our minds once we take seriously the question Guido asked shortly before discovering the heap of corpses: "What if this were nothing but a dream?" Differently put, the film/fairy tale/game suggests that we regard even the worst of nightmares as parts of a dream.

Life Is Beautiful is not the first film to try a comedic approach for the depiction of Nazi monstrosity. Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940, Guido's number in the camp is the same as Chaplin's Jewish barber's), Lubitsch's *To Be or Not To Be* (1942), and Mel Brooks' 1983 remake of the latter had already done that. Of course Chaplin's and Lubitsch's films were pre-Holocaust, but they can be considered as predecessors of *Life Is Beautiful*. Their authors thought that comedic spirit and laughter would constitute a weapon and a medicine, a resilient response to an enemy who expected only tragedy's lament.

In addition to these films, a small but significant body of literary works has dared to stray from realism and high drama to introduce "the comic": Tadeusz Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1948!); Andre Schwarz-Bart's *The Last of the Just* (1959); Jurek Becker's *Jacob the Liar* (1969); Leslie Epstein's *King of the Jews* (1979); Aron Appelfeld's *Badenheim* 1939 (1980). Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) successfully proved that even comics could respect the Holocaust and provide yet another tool for the dissemination of its memory.

Of course, the crucial theoretical piece in the debate sparked by the juxtaposition of laughter and the Holocaust is Des Pres' "Holocaust Laughter," in which he argues that *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen*, *King of the Jews*, and *Maus* not only respected the Holocaust in spite of their generic transgressions but turned out to be more effective than most tragic, realistic portrayals of it. For "it's not fear and sorrow we need more of, but undaunted vision. The paradox of the comic approach is that by setting things at a distance it permits us a tougher, more *active* response." (286) Des Pres finds that "tragedy and lamentation affirm *what is* and proceed largely in a mimetic mode" so that we are "forced to a standstill by the matter we behold." (279) But these three books "as works of art that include a comic element . . . give us laughter's benefits without betraying our deeper convictions." (286) Des Pres' brilliant discussion opens up fascinating questions. If realism is all that is allowed in cinematic representations of the Holocaust, where can we go next? Should we expand the *Schindler's List* model, piling horror on horror, pity upon pity? Should we escalate the representation of violence by becoming more graphic and tragic? Aside from the fact that realistic films may give the false impression that the Holocaust can be represented, "serious" comedy (which, like *Life Is Beautiful* and Mihaileanu's *Train of Life*, does not laugh at the Holocaust but against its deadening weight) may constitute a viable option. Provided of course that we take it seriously.

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Notes

1. *Train of Life* will be released in the U.S. later this year. It played at the Boston Jewish Film Festival in November 1998 and the Mill Valley Film Festival in October 1999. It tells the story of a French Jewish village whose elders decide to dodge the Nazi by "deporting themselves." They buy a train, make German uniforms for half of their men, and pretend that the entire village is being deported to Auschwitz, when, in fact, the train is trying to reach Palestine. Despite its failure to do so, there is still a bravura, upbeat feel to the film.

2. Legend has it that Chaplin, asked on the occasion of the release of *The Great Dictator* whether he was Jewish, replied: "I don't have that honor."
3. My using Peary on *Life Is Beautiful* as the exemplary "bad review," has nothing to do with what I think of his other writings. My attack is ad positionem and not ad hominem. Besides, his review of Benigni's film is exemplary to the point of unconscious self-parody and I could not avoid making him into a strawman of sorts.
4. Stanley Kaufmann, *New Republic*, November 23, 1998, pp. 26–7, another mixture of poorly digested press kit and thundering anathemas. Kaufmann goes so far as to suggest that "apparently he [Benigni] couldn't devise enough material to set the whole film in the camp, so he fills the first half of the picture with his slapstick (silhouette) adventures." Richard Schickel, *Time*, November 9, 1998, pp. 116–17. Arguing that the film "trivializes the holocaust," Schickel suggests that "sentimentality is a kind of fascism too, robbing us of judgment and moral acuity, and needs to be resisted." With all due respect, I would like to remind Schickel that he writes for a magazine which is a transparent vehicle of dominant ideology and as such does what he accuses Begnini of doing: it robs its readers of judgement and, yes, moral acuity. J. Hoberman, the *Village Voice*, Oct. 27, 1998, p. 98. I mention his review here only because he ultimately voiced a negative judgment. I have, however, no problems with this stand, since he takes the film seriously enough to turn the review into a site for useful information and stimulating opinions. When he concludes that "in its fantasy of divine grace," *Life Is Beautiful* "is also nonsense," he actually uncovers what most reviews (positive or negative) missed: the film's spiritual dimension. Indeed, it is a tribute to Hoberman's intelligence and professionalism that his "negative" review does a better job on *Life Is Beautiful* than many of the opposite sign.
5. I accessed this interview on the WWW. It can be downloaded from: http://www.isg.it/pubb/2001/inter/intben.htm. This is one of the interviews that fueled my conviction that Benigni has a wide range of cultural interests ranging from Buddha to Schopenhauer, from Dante to St. Francis, etc. Considerations of space kept me from providing a history of Benigni's cultural/cinematic career (see Simonelli & Tramontana, and Martinelli, Nassini & Wetzl).
6. Due to lack of space, I cannot discuss writer Vittorio Cerami's vital collaboration with Benigni in the film script (cf. bibliography on Benigni). Already a collaborator of such directors as Pasolini (e.g., *Hawks and Sparrows*) and Amelio (e.g., *Open Doors*), Cerami co-wrote Benigni's last four films. Everything I say about the script must be thought of as the result of a collaboration rather than the work of a single auteur.
7. This image, actually, is a visual quote from *Accattone.* During his ill-fated attempt to reform, Accattone tries working. He has to unload huge scraps of iron, all day. After a while, he collapses with fatigue and exclaims, "Where are we, in Buchenwald!"
8. *Un tempo per ridere, un tempo per piangere*: In Italy, film showings include a break in the middle, the two segments of the film being called "primo tempo" and "secondo tempo."

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Reviews

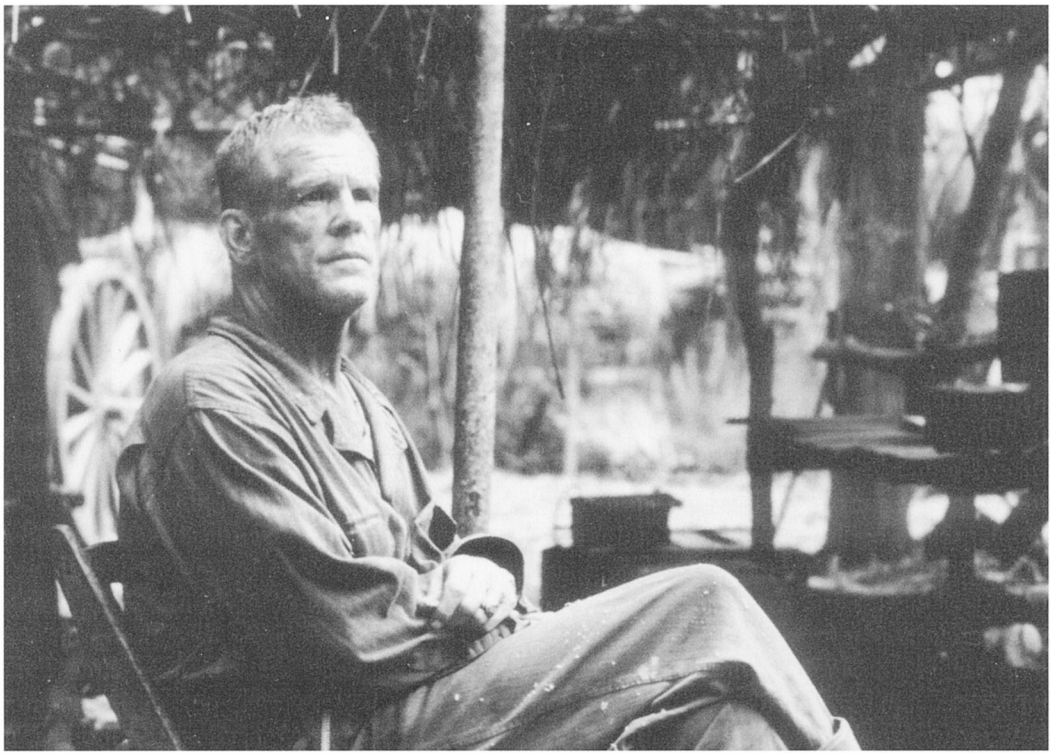
The Thin Red Line

Director/writer: Terrence Malick. Producers: Michael Geisler, John Roberdeau, Grant Hill. Cinematographer: John Toll. Production designer: Jack Fisk. Music: Hans Zimmer. Fox 2000 Pictures.

A basic tension between irony and ardency informs Terrence Malick's films of the 1970s—*Badlands* (1974) and *Days of Heaven* (1979). The outlaw-lovers-on-the-run template of *Badlands* splits the difference between the socially conscious romanticism of Nicholas Ray's *They Drive by Night* (1947) and the counter-culture mythmaking of *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), while *Days of Heaven* weds Whitman's poetic ideal of the democratic vista to the interior landscapes of Henry James, with a plot that evokes *The Wings of the Dove* even as it ends with a quasi-Biblical plague of locusts. The later film's sources may on the whole be classically literary, including Mark Twain and Willa Cather, but the film shares some of the aestheticist detachment of the earlier film, a cool distanciation that inheres in the formalist rigor of its imagery and the inexorable languor of its violence. In *Days of Heaven*, aesthetic distance resides in a complex system of modernist narrative ellipses, but collides with an aesthete's passionate lyricism, much as in *Badlands* the continuing hope of innocence, still visible in quicksilver nature, meets the seeming inevitability of corruption.

In Malick's new film, his first in 20 years, this tension is gone. *The Thin Red Line*, based on James Jones' 1962 novel of World War II, pursues the strains of ardent feeling of the director's earlier work but, without seeming to renounce it, forsakes the irony. The core of the film follows an American battalion's fight against the Japanese for a hill at Guadalcanal, and although this core provides dramatic grounding for the movie, it is flanked at both ends, beginning and end, by stretches of storytelling so fragmentary, so mercurial, they're nearly abstract. In *Badlands* Malick sought the stringency of a tone poem, in *Days of Heaven* the breadth of a ballad; in *The Thin Red Line*, the director aspires to the impersonal grandeur of the epic. In each set of narrative possibilities, Malick finds the same association between pain and ecstasy, but in the earlier films the dialectic bred agitation, while in *The Thin Red Line* it has resolved into a strange tranquility. Narrative here remains tied to archetype, a set of given patterns self-consciously recombined, arranged with the impartial sophistication of a chronicler attuned to the gridwork of collective unconsciousness, but the

Woody Harrelson as Sergeant Keck



Nick Nolte as Lieutenant Colonel Tall

fervently self-reflexive turns of the story, as complex as ever, are no longer in the service of a compulsive skepticism. *The Thin Red Line* is an anti-war movie, but unlike other anti-war movies it superficially resembles, from the hallucinatory inferno of *Apocalypse Now* (1979) to the gung-ho kitsch of *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), it is almost entirely free of anger or bitterness. Its battle scenes are poetically matter-of-fact, among the most powerful ever filmed, but its critique of the ethos of war appears to derive from a vantage point of ultimate quiescence, and in that regard, *The Thin Red Line* is unique among American war films.

In its picture of combat, *The Thin Red Line* falls somewhere between Renoir's *Grand Illusion* (1937), with battle scenes put in, and Jancso's *The Red and the White* (1969) or *Saving Private Ryan*, with the savagery distilled. The representations of battle in *The Thin Red Line* do not shirk the need to confront ferment or unspeakable bestiality. They expose with the single-mindedness of sober, unyielding conviction the fundamental outcome of war: the deaths of boys. With the dulcified logic of an elegy, grievously resigned to past losses but steadfastly borne up against future ones—like the poems of Wilfred Owen—the battle scenes unflinchingly portray relentless casualty, but they do so in a mode of inconsolable lyricism: sudden cuts to the unbearable beauty of a breathtaking, twilit sky that heralds only doom, or protean inserts of a fissured leaf with blinding light streaming through the holes. Even if, Whitmanesque, they romanticize fated male youth, these lyric interludes do not poeticize the soldiers' deaths—the violence is too immediate—but forthrightly show what it is that these deaths violate. As Renoir does in *Grand Illusion*, Malick refuses the salve of villainy. Even the driven battalion commander, Tall (Nick Nolte), who pushes men to their deaths, is himself—in pensive voiceovers—revealed as vulnerable, and although in the clearest gauge of the film's post-Vietnam dispositions we are confronted with the grisly spectacle of Americans gratuitously torturing entrapped Asians, these scenes appear to propose reversion to barbarity as a refutation of the pseudo-rationality of military science.

The narrative structure of the film divests the battle scenes of the excitement or grandeur typical of the genre. For one thing, the big battle scene is displaced from a climactic position in the story, and after it is over, the film goes on for nearly an hour without heeding any narrative compulsions to build further. Malick risks such anticlimax to strip the battle-scenes of trivializing generic functions that apotheosize a plot's setups or generate frivolous suspense. These scenes absorb the heightened energies of elevated rhetoric, to be sure, and they have a hushed, breathtaking sweep, but it is characterized by a diffused sensibility. The primary formal maneuver of these scenes is a sinuous, decentered tracking shot that glides over multiple planes of action,

(from left) Ben Chaplin as Bell, John Cusack as Gaff, and Jim Caviezel as Witt

following one character and then shifting to others with just the smallest turns of its roving but precisely defined perspective. In these shots, the camera's gaze seems to be at once restive, unflinching, and tender, and even as it shows how each of the men is alone in his fear, it constantly reveals unexpected connections between them in space. In such shots, Malick has solved the problem of how to represent battle as collective strife, against demands of individualist narrative points-of-view. In battle, the men are deindividuated and sympathetically particularized in the same moment. The fracturing of the narrative line also works to refuse the standard emotional parabola of the war film. We are frequently shown effects *before* causes, shown badly wounded men, for instance, before the fighting itself.

The uses of voiceover in the film similarly contribute to the construction of character, synthesizing impersonal chronicle with stream-of-consciousness poetics. In Malick's previous films, the voiceover was the clearest gauge of irony, revealing the distance between the limited perspectives of the characters and the mordant self-reflexivity of the narration. In *Badlands*, Holly (Sissy Spacek) delivered a patter of dime-novel clichés over a steely procession of tersely contrapuntal images, while in *Days of Heaven* the little sister, Linda (Linda Manz), mixed the florid and the taciturn in artlessly meditative monologues that surprise in their patchwork assembly as surely in what they show she does not know as in what they show she does. These voiceovers ask to be seen as pastiches—of a penny-dreadful false-consciousness or of a kid's tough, slangy talk—yet despite the irony of their deployment, they also comment on the poignancy of misrecognition and the vulnerability of the ignorant or the impressionable. The sentiments uttered in voiceover in *The Thin Red Line* could also easily be heard as clichés. "What is this war in nature?," is the first sentence we hear, murmured earnestly by the AWOL soldier Witt at the start of the film. "I was a prisoner, you set me free. . . . I drink you like water," says Private Bell in an interior monologue addressed to his wife. "You are my sons," thinks the officer, Staros, leaving his battalion, "my dear sons. I carry you inside me."

These musings are delivered with real, direct conviction, and they are not counterpointed by action or images, as the voiceovers in *Days of Heaven* or *Badlands* are. They are elliptical, however, fleeting and fragmentary, and they no more function to convey exposition than the voiceovers of Malick's previous films do. Indeed, so dispersed are they across the film's many characters—at one point, as we're looking at the lifeless face of a half-buried Japanese soldier, we hear a rumination in what we can only assume to be the dead man's voice—and so ephemeral are they, so moody and mercurial, they serve something like the *opposite* function of a traditional voiceover. Far from seeming to grant any privileged access to the interior lives of the

characters, these voiceovers make those interior lives seem *more* mysterious than they would otherwise. They are the fragments of thoughts, prayers, letters home, yet as these forms bleed into one another, and as the voiceovers blur the boundaries of inner and outer—at times what begins as a line of spoken dialogue ends as a voiceover—their address seems finally constant. All the men, together or alone, even at the height of battle, and even if they think they are addressing God or one another or absent lovers, are really talking only to themselves. Their musings would have to be rejected as cliché only if we, as listeners, insisted upon reverting them to a public form, and they claim a measure of their pathos from their forthright platitude, showing a hopeful perseverance of the private, even in the grip of the ultimate, when selves are lost. They are the shards of lost, fleeting voices that, even if we are somehow privy to them, can have no real hearer in the world.

Among other things, *The Thin Red Line* is a mosaic of faces, and the use of actors is determined by the narrative impulse to collectivism—though the jarring appearance of "stars" sometimes undermines this impulse. The dominant scales of the film's perspectives are long shots and close-ups, and by combining these extremes, Malick synthesizes the epic and the intimate. The close-ups work by principles of Eisensteinian typage, shots sometimes gone too quickly to afford recognition of the actor's face, and sometimes lingering, held to suggest an oblique, obtuse meaning beyond the visible. Because the narrative follows no single character as its focus, the viewer is repeatedly surprised by the reappearance of characters in unexpected contexts, and because exposition is presented so elusively, the faces take on meanings they might otherwise not have assumed. As Witt, James Caviezel brings an expressive tranquility to the film, and it is right there in his open, angular face, at once beatific and amused, generous and skeptical. In Jones' novel, Witt is kin to the character of Prewitt from Jones' previous book, *From Here to Eternity*, famously filmed by Fred Zinneman in 1953, and Caviezel's facial resemblance to Montgomery Clift, who played Prewitt in Zinneman's movie, marks the film's allusive distance from more typical war movies. Caviezel also resembles Ben Chaplin, who plays Bell, and the movie exploits the resemblance by courting confusion between the characters, as if to connote visually the final meditation we hear spoken in the film: "Darkness and light, strife and love—are they the workings of one mind, the features of the same face?"

The movie follows the plot of Jones' novel fairly closely, with crucial exceptions, but its final effects are closer to those of another Jones—David—and another James—Joyce. In its mixture of discursive forms, its atomization of character, its plaintive contemplation of the philosophy of war, it bears direct affinities to David Jones' extraordinary novel/poem/palimpsest of World War I, *In Parenthesis* (1939), while in its marshaling of streams-of-consciousness, it suggests *Ulysses*—and the first memory in the film appears to evoke directly the death of Stephen's mother in that novel. The film is delicately allusive—the lyricism of the opening suggests Flaherty and Murnau's *Tabu*, while the battle scenes cite other famous cinematic battles from *Alexander Nevsky* to *Chimes at Midnight*—but the references do not conjure a postmodern citationality. Rather, they function almost subliminally (like allusion in *Ulysses*), introducing a framework of self-consciousness against which to apprehend the story's emotional content. Malick may be adapting a straightforward war story, but he returns to a distinctively modernist heritage to negotiate the relation between aesthetic distance and emotional engagement.

Malick taught philosophy before he turned to filmmaking, and this meditation on the nature of war, or the war in nature, echoes philosophical treatises on the subject from Heraclitus's fragments to Kant's *Perpetual Peace*. By granting such insights to unschooled characters, Malick keeps them from grandiosity and suggests a dialogic, uncontentious interplay of ideas. On the one hand, especially in its lyric mode, the film seems to adopt a Kantian idea of war as the instrument of nature toward the purpose of unifying through differentiation and ordering through the establishment of covenant, accord, or law. On the other hand, the film expresses abhorrence of war to a degree that is astonishing considering its refusal to stir emotional allegiances or proprietary affiliation—as if to express simple rage, or outrage, at the ravages of war would merely reenact the same impulses that brought them about. There is probably no other film that so compellingly represents the horror of war, yet so thoroughly resists the dialectics of conflict. Its tone is mournful, not angry. Watching it, you may feel it is showing you what is slipping inexorably away as you gaze. Look, the film seems to say in shot after shot, *Look: here is what will be lost.*

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Saving Private Ryan

Director/producer: Steven Spielberg. Cinematographer: Janusz Kaminski. Writer: Robert Rodat. Editor: Michael Kahn. Music: John Williams. Dreamworks.

In September 1998, Steven Spielberg received the Knight Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany from President Roman Herzog, who expressed Germany's appreciation to the American Jewish director. "Germany thanks you for work that has given us more than you may realize," said Herzog. The film that made the Germans realize that there were maybe heroes among them would be *Schindler's List.* Yet at that time, Spielberg's subsequent film was also playing in German cinemas—a film that had as its cornerstone the same verse from the Talmud emblazoned on the screen in *Schindler's List*: "Whoever saves one life, saves the world entire."

In making *Saving Private Ryan*, Spielberg inverted that principle to show an entire group setting out to save a single—and virtually unknown—soldier, someone more remote to them than Schindler's people were to him. *Saving Private Ryan* focuses on Captain John Miller's (Tom Hanks) leading a special squadron detailed to find and save the last son of Mrs. Ryan, whose other three boys have perished on three different fronts. The carnage they must face is so often blamed on their quest that, by the time we meet Ryan himself, he all too readily accepts the burden of guilt. Spielberg's ability to look at World War II first this way, then that, has guaranteed him an altar in the magazine/TV/newsprint edifice that enshrines pop culture—where our latest products are sheltered, framed, hung, and subjected to an examination of ourselves within the work of art. The critical establishment seldom bothers to wire in a feed from Europe, where reactions to Hollywood product can alert us to surprising things about the movies themselves, as well as the auteurs behind them. In Germany, for example, the reception of *Schindler's List* undoubtedly benefitted from the effect of historian Daniel Goldberg tutoring the people in their proper role as willing villains. Spielberg brought relief by focusing on the hero among them and creating a masterpiece dedicated to their past.

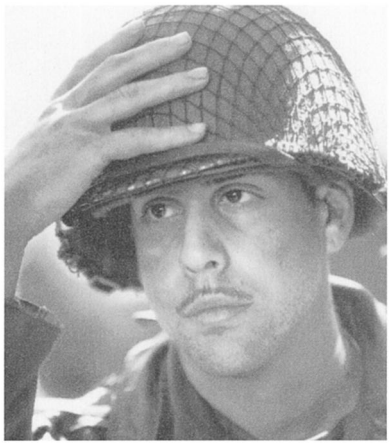
By the time President Herzog came to thank Spielberg, he could tacitly include *Saving Private Ryan* for its relatively benevolent portrait of the German soldier—certainly from the point of view of those who could understand the German dialogue of the film. Why the German dialogue was not shared with English-speaking, or rather, non-German-speaking audiences raises an issue that has not yet been addressed.

In a movie where most of what is said serves to register the shock of battle (often with anachronistic profanity), one scene stands out for the nature of the dialogue, precisely because such a scene requires little dialogue. It is the last big sequence, in which Private Mellish (Adam Goldberg), the Jewish enlisted man who has enjoyed taunting German P.O.W.s with his Star of David, is now waiting in a tower for ammunition. Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies), who only hours before has impressed his comrades with translations of the melancholy *chansons* of Edith Piaf, is chosen for this mission and thus finds himself in the middle of a raging battle relegated to ammo-delivery boy. Mellish is waiting for him to bring more rounds to keep the Germans at bay, but the onslaught of the German forces has left the young corporal petrified, and he hides from the German soldier who enters the tower and heads up the stairs towards Mellish. Upham creeps halfway up the staircase after him, cringing in fear, incapable of rescuing Mellish.

When the German discovers Mellish, he leaps on him. As the two soldiers struggle, we realize the German is also out of ammunition. Their confrontation comes down to a *mano a mano* death match, which, to be sure, has been the core scene of every great war story since *The Iliad.* Mellish and the German roll over on top of each other, kicking, lunging, strangling, until they're down to their knives. They are evenly matched until Mellish's knife is knocked out of his hand, and the German bears down on him with the knife poised at his heart. Mellish pushes up on the German's arm. Their death grip is like two scorpions in a bottle.

To increase the tension of the scene, the German soldier maintains a steady stream of hissing at Mellish. (In sports, this kind of thing is called talking trash and is used to unnerve the opponents, although it was once considered bad sportsmanship.) Most American viewers seem to think the German's words are another kind of torture for Mellish, threatening him or cursing him, because the harsh guttural sounds of the language strike the ear as dreadful, even evil. This is merely a problem of perception, because what the German is saying to Mellish is actually quite different: "Lass uns es beenden. . . ." ("Let's just end it all.")

In short, the German wants to show the American an easy death. Why? This is not the sadistic, vicious enemy we know from standard issue Nazis in WWII pictures. Is Spielberg trying to humanize the enemy? In this duel to the death, the German soldier



Adam Goldberg
as Private Mellish

Corporal Upham (Jeremy Davies) under fire

D-Day invasion of Normandy

seems to bring mercy to the ghastly business of being a soldier. Unfortunately, once Mellish and the German go at each other, there's no mercy until one of them is dead. I believe the entire point of this scene is lost if we do not understand what the German is saying to his victim. The lack of subtitles encourages us to resort to the idea of the evil, hissing German, a cliché that inflates the Teutonic terror enveloping these innocent Americans. (In 1944, Americans were by definition still innocent.)

Spielberg's point in this scene is perhaps less about the two men fighting than about the witness to their fight, Corporal Upham, who is portrayed from his first scene as a bumbler (expecting to bring his Smith & Corona typewriter with him) or a sucker (as he gets set up by the other men in the detail). Here, Upham is the ineffectual intellectual who failed to get Mellish the bullets to defend himself and now must lurk just out of sight eavesdropping on the death for which he is, in some sense, responsible. Certainly, the camera implicates him because the film continuously cuts back to him cringing in shame. Among the Americans with whom we are meant to identify, Upham alone understands what is said. Upham, however, is no threat, and the German soldier can't even be bothered to kill him as he passes him on the stairs after killing Mellish. Upham offers the profile of a man who, after the war, will not be able to live with himself—far more than Private Ryan, who pleads with Captain Miller to let him fight along with his comrades.

A reasonable interpretation of the scene is impossible without understanding the sequence as a microcosm of the war that Captain Miller and his men have come to fight. Mellish must die, but the German who survives goes misunderstood—except by Upham, who is made most miserable by his own cowardice. Corporal Upham, not Private Ryan, offers the best example of a life lived at the expense of his comrade. Among the reasons for the U.S. to enter WWII, the death of Mellish serves to remind us of the Jews being slaughtered by the Germans, while the search for Private Ryan represents the sacrifices made necessary because America entered the war at such a late stage, when so many fronts demanded so much manpower. It is impossible not to think of all that while watching the prolonged wrestling match between Mellish and his killer.

The sacrifice of Mellish reverberates in our memory as we watch the contemporary scenes that open and conclude Spielberg's film. Some 50 years after the end of WWII, Private Ryan turns to his wife with the query, "Have I lived a life worthy of the great sacrifices made for me?" The same question could be asked of Upham,

and of course, we could not answer with the same assurance given Ryan, because Upham's cowardice is appalling and serves as foil against which Ryan's insistence on fighting, even when he has an order from the High Command to avoid the battle, is made to seem even more noble.

How did they get into such a complicated mess? As the film opens, the Germans are entrenched above the beach, with an invisible sharpshooter firing mercilessly. The German enemy is always more powerful for being unseen, which is, I propose, the visual equivalent of language not understood. Whenever German soldiers come into view, they are striking for their failure to frighten us—with the sole exception of the German soldier come to slay Mellish. Upon gaining the plateau above the beach, the Americans have their first face-to-face encounter with German soldiers. A row of them emerges, hands in the air, approaching as P.O.W.s, trying to communicate in German. The Americans can't understand them, so they shoot them.

In another scene, Captain Miller's detail, just embarked on its mission, rests under cover of a bombed-out building, and suddenly the back wall collapses, revealing a unit of German soldiers playing cards. Surprised and defenselessness, they cry out—again, in untranslated German—"Don't shoot!" Their hands go up in alarm as Upham gives them a German command: "Haende hoch—ohne zu scherzen." ("Hands up, no kidding.") But suddenly a shot goes off, and the Germans are mowed down. It is a situation ripe for taking prisoners of war, and its morality is complicated by our not knowing who fired that first shot. But the relief felt by Captain Miller's Americans at still being alive makes them all the more suspect, when it comes to Geneva Conventions. This is compounded when we realize the other soldiers have no respect for the German-speaking Upham. This ethical dilemma is expanded and explored in a sequence where Captain Miller's unit does take a prisoner of war, a man so desperate to stay alive that his begging takes the form of a recitation of every American notion cluttering up his mind: "I like American . . . Steamboat Willie, Betty Boop, Betty Grable, nice gams. . . . What a dish! . . . Donald Duck . . . O-oh say can you sink? . . . Fuck Hitler. . . ." It is a stream-of-consciousness list of Yankee cultural exports worthy of James Joyce, but it only inspires Captain Miller's men to take aim and fire.

Spielberg has trouble handling a theme with straightforward consistency. In *Saving Private Ryan*, he indulges his artistic schizophrenia in an early scene that lends a comic irony to the enemy. Hanks' little platoon takes a P.O.W. and details him to dig graves. When the Americans are ready to make him fall into his own grave, Miller protects them from their worst instincts. He sticks to the Geneva Convention, but, unable to be burdened with a P.O.W. in his mission, simply grants the German his life and sends him on his way. In the final scene, that soldier has done what a soldier must do—rejoined his ranks. There he is, among the Germans attacking the bridge Miller is defending. In the final moments, they face each other in the village square. "I know that guy," cries the German in friendly tones—in German (again sans subtitles and sadly not understood), but too late. The German soldiers aim and kill Captain Miller.

In the interstices of this ghastly saga, Spielberg has tried to show the impulse to communicate, to say something meaningful, even humane. Alas, it always goes untranslated. The translator himself, as conceived by the story, is basically a jerk—a man who sits around translating songs for his comrades while they wait for the German tanks to mow them down. He would not be such a bad guy hanging around on the Left Bank 20 years earlier, but he's not cut out for a foxhole.

Ultimately, we watch this film as a generation of Americans who have never risked their lives to defend the free world or gone hungry because there was scarcely enough food for the entire family. In short, to those of us who have never made a personal sacrifice for the greater good, Steven Spielberg brings us the ersatz opportunity of the experience we missed because of the Pax Americana. That same peace puts the Germans in a rather similar situation: What have they suffered lately? *Saving Private Ryan* exploits every possible cinematic trick to recreate the emotional reality of a soldier dumped onto an alien beach and into an onslaught of enemy mortar. Whether American or German, the viewer is faced with death, and as the film goes on, the dubious means of dodging death. If you're American, you thank Spielberg for bringing you close to the last justifiable war. On the other hand, a German can thank Spielberg for not showing him as a villain, but rather continuing with a cause begun in *Schindler's List* to restore dignity and credibility to the Germans as having accepted their destiny and faced battle as worthy foes.

Or, knowing how filmmakers tend to deny all interpretations of their films, Spielberg may have indulged the contradictions in his narrative in order to save himself not from the Germans, but, alas!, from the intellectuals.

Karen Jaehne writes film reviews for, among others, www.FilmScouts.com.

Velvet Goldmine

Director/writer: Todd Haynes. Producer: Christine Vachon. Cinematographer: Maryse Alberti. Editor: James Lyons. Costume Designer: Sandy Powell. Music: Carter Burwell. Miramax.

A ravishing tribute to the Ziggy Stardust decade, Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* traces a line of British homosexual flamboyance from legendary grand-dandy Oscar Wilde to drag cabaret to the 70s gender-subterfuge phenomenon known as glam rock. Velvet adopts Wilde's aesthetic philosophy, voiced in *Lady Windemere's Fan*, "It's absurd to divide people into good and bad. People are either charming or tedious." Self-crafted exotics in the mode of Wilde or Beau Brummell, the glam rockers were gender innovators for taking advantage of the association of performance with female sexual display, wedding the macho rock-star pose with the feminine archetype of a preening, glamorous pin-up queen.

Haynes immediately establishes *Velvet*'s debt to Wilde in his phantasmagorical opening shot of an ELO spaceship dropping Wilde from the sky. Mixing rock's hokey spiritualism with a sentimental belief in the transformative nature of gay identity, the moment references the cosmic, kitschy metaphysicality that characterized rock opera, traces of which Haynes retains in his portrait of the rich fantasy life of glam. But what makes *Velvet Goldmine* truly idiosyncratic is the director's reluctance to suggest his clearly beloved social phenomenon of glam is some historical anomaly.

Instead, Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* envisions the evolution of glam as a continuum of what sartorial critic Anne Hollander sees as the dandy's creed, in which "A man's heroism consisted only in being thoroughly himself." For Wilde, style was subversion, a way for a meritocracy of self-created, individual achievement to rise above aristocracy and bestowed social wealth and class. A green brooch said to be worn by Oscar Wilde is passed between the characters in *Velvet* as a token of their identification with Wilde's self-appointed—in Haynes' terms extraterrestrial—status as outsider.

Referencing the rise of glitter rock stars like David Bowie, Iggy Pop, Bryan Ferry, and the New York Dolls in a fictional mode, *Velvet Goldmine* centers on the efforts of a reporter, Arthur Stuart (Christian Bale), to return to the vanished, charmed years of his British youth on the fringe of the exploding glam scene. The glam movement demarcated the years when Stuart's sexual

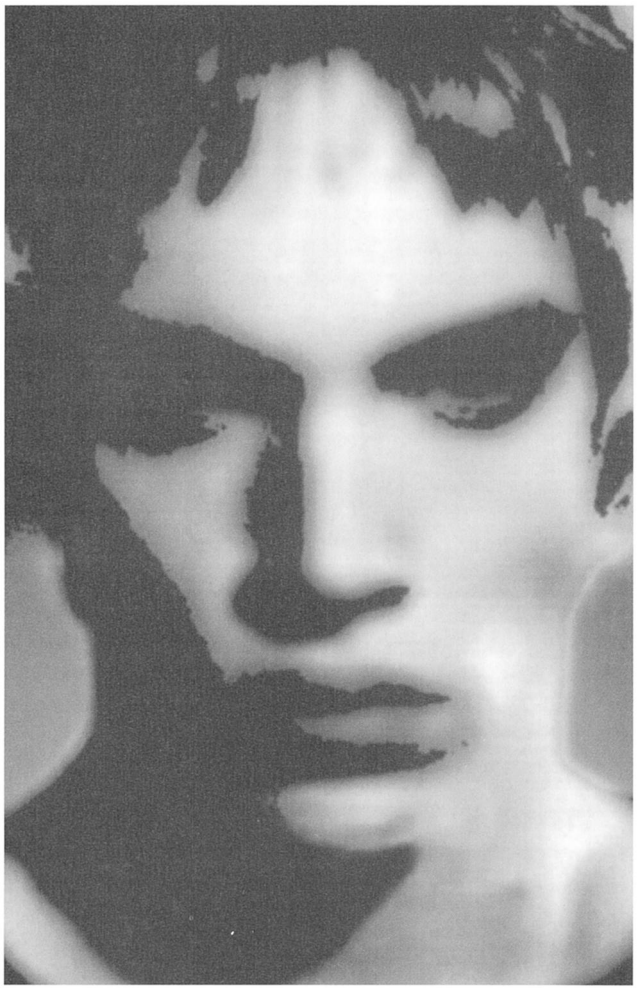
Golden boys: Jonathan Rhys-Meyers (left) and Ewan McGregor

identity was articulated and given expression by performers Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers) and Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor), homages to Bowie and Iggy. The inspiration for Slade and Wild is a nightclub phantom, Jack Fairy (Micko Westmoreland), who makes his most memorable appearance in *Velvet* in an homage to Kenneth Anger's color-saturated glamour-fugue *Puce Moment* and whose dandy artifice wafts like a heady perfume through the film, grounding glam in the overlapping worlds of gay subculture and old Hollywood glamour.

Haynes sets the terms of Arthur's melancholy in a grim, robotic present which brutally contrasts with flashbacks to his color-saturated, kaleidoscopic glam youth. The colorless Manhattan of the Reagan 80s, rendered in shades of polluted browns and gunmetal greys and dictated by an Orwellian monotony, makes all the more visceral and bittersweet Arthur's lost world of music and possibility. Referencing *Citizen Kane*'s detective-story framing device, *Velvet* has Arthur investigating the event that sounded the death knell of glam: the mock assassination of its seminal peacock, Brian Slade. Haynes' insight in using this flashback structure is showing the unbearable wistfulness, the sense of one's youth and sexual promise evaporated, that hear-

ing the music of the past can inspire. In *Velvet*, glitter is like dust—the reminder of a once beautiful phenomenon's sad traces.

Haynes' shockingly intelligent and visually dazzling film is not only an examination of an isolated rock fad, but a look at how rock stars—and music—become sexual figureheads for our own desires—poster children of the libido. Nowhere is this phenomenon clearer than in the figure of Curt Wild, a character partly modeled on Iggy Pop (but also evoking another self-destructive punk maverick, Kurt Cobain), whose hypnotic performances are glittering shrines to sexuality, rage, and escape from his grim Wisconsin trailer-park past. Wild, who at one point in *Velvet* tells a reporter, "You can't fake being gay," is the integrity of the movement, and with his flight from its bosom, the music is finally reduced to mere surface glitz. The icon of glam's eventual perversion is the plastic pop idol Tommy Stone, whose blandly sinister face haunts Arthur's contemporary Manhattan. The 70s glam fans who once integrated the musical androgyny into their daily lives give way to the cowed, identity-less Tommy Stone disciples who wear plastic masks bearing their idol's face.



The face of glam

Music as an emotional trigger and a means of self-creation is captured with great pathos and humor in Arthur's first purchase of a "swishy" Brian Slade album, which he fondles and studies back in his teenage bedroom like a fetish object (a scene which also laments the death of the tactile, sensory pleasures the LP provided). Haynes shows how the androgynous heroes of glam operate as conduits to Arthur's own homosexuality. They inspire Arthur to put on his first glitter ensemble and parade the youth-clogged streets of London. In a gesture of utterly poignant, tentative self-expression, Arthur imagines himself shrieking to his father while watching Slade on TV, "That's me, Dad! That's me!" It's one of the truest and saddest moments in the film, for the myriad gaps it points out: between desire and being; between a hoped-for sexual life and an actual one; between a life of the present and an imagined future; between Arthur and his poor, colorless, TV-incubated parents.

What makes *Velvet* abrade with its special form of aching wistfulness is the flashback structure which reminds us that Arthur has become the thing he feared: a robotic, lifeless creature, far from the questing adventurer of his youth. In many ways, *Velvet* is an allegory of youth's end, of the wistfulness of hearing the music of your past as some lingering evidence of a former self. The scene encapsulates what gives *Velvet* its unique combination of lofty gender-bending, pop culture insight, and rare sweetness.

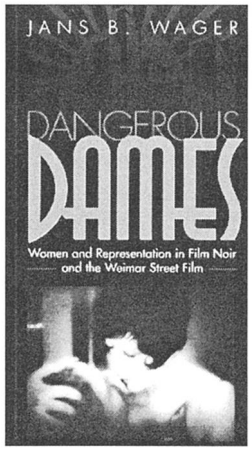
Haynes' depth of feeling for the limitations life imposes on his characters is evident in the entrapped SoCal housewife of *Safe* or the singer trapped within an idea of a doll's body in Haynes' Barbie-doll melodrama Superstar. The director often uses the most florid and campy forms and foregrounded style to get at, sideways, the real emotional texture of his subject matter, demonstrating how camp, in its purest form, always exhibits an investment and affection for what it's treating. As much as the glam movement was an act of self-creation beyond working class, beyond gender, beyond a stifling, sexually repressed adulthood, Haynes' film is itself a tribute to the giddy transportive power of filmmaking language; one panning the tawdry gold of 70s rock operas (*Phantom of the Paradise*, *Tommy*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*) reassembled into a theoretical treatise on gender as a performance and pop culture as transformative. Shot in the tongue-in-cheek, gaudy style of 70s rock operas like *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and *Lisztomania*, *Velvet* walks a

brilliant line between kitsch and homage with its dizzying overabundance of style. Its confirmed gaudiness, sudden swish zooms, faked painted backdrops, and gleams of light flaring against the camera lens reference 70s filmmaking while capturing glam's candy-coated outrageousness and cathartic, polymorphous perversity. Haynes' emphasis on a frenetic visual style shows his investment in film as a liberating, visual language whose aesthetics are as meaning-laden as its themes.

In moments of gilded emotionalism like Brian Slade's on-stage assassination, Haynes taps into the streak of theatricality and effervescent melodrama in music and in these musical films—the kind of histrionics which speak so persuasively to the heightened drama of being teenage. Haynes mixes high and low in a manner many critics tended to write off as scrambled and disconnected, but which somehow, nevertheless, distilled the essence of youth, when pop culture and identity-formation are deliriously intertwined. *Goldmine* adopts the collapsed, elliptical storytelling of rock opera, in which emotional investment with characters is replaced with the emotional urgency of the music.

For a subculture-aligned director like Haynes, glam was an assertion of a sexually gymnastic, playful identity which was embraced and ingested like candy into mainstream life. Haynes suggests glam made the 70s, for a time, the utopian, decadent sexual paradise which the grace-less, sloppy hippie years had only promised. Unlike the current retro movement to exhume the decade (making us as sick of the post-70s pastiche as we were of the original), Haynes' film actually manages to make the the decade both sexy and culturally viable again. Resurrecting a supposedly tacky fad, Haynes shows not only glam's debt to gay subculture and its influence on performance, but how even the most apparently throwaway pop culture can hold great, life-altering meaning for its fans.

Felicia Feaster is co-author, with Bret Wood, of *Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film* (Baltimore: Midnight Marquee).



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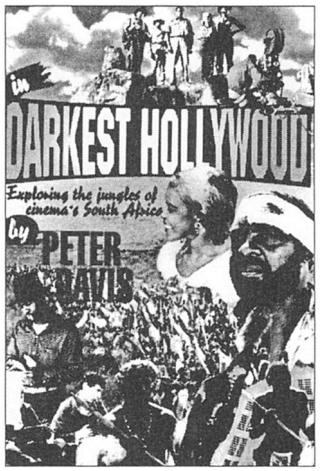

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PART II

Bazin at Work

Major Reviews from the Forties and Fifties

By André Bazin. Translated by Alain Piette and Bert Cardullo. Edited by Bert Cardullo. New York: Routledge, 1997. $69.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

Up to the publication of this book, Bazin has had the critical reputation of the high priest of realism in film. His ascribed orthodoxy maintains that the cinema has value as it preserves transient details of life with a vivid objectivity exceptional to every other art form. A statement in *Bazin at Work* such as ". . . the essence of film from the very start . . . has been a quest for the realism of the image" (88) accords with the mold of his ideas given in the previous English-language publications of his work—*What Is Cinema?,* volumes 1 (1967) and 2 (1971). The continuous image of the critic as the apostle of cinematic realism retains the attraction of a firm point in film scholarship. Citations can be made simply, and explanations of his work consistent and familiar.

Yet it would be unjust not to relish the dimensions added to Bazin's film-thinking by the current collection. *What Is Cinema?* established Bazin's ideas in a philosophical position in film criticism by both the moderate length of the pieces and their often abstracted assertions. The recent publication sets out his work in two parts: "On Directors and On Cinema," and—often quite briefly—"On Individual Films." In both sections, readers will find novel angles of the critic to limber up the rigid associations his name usually evokes.

Speaking of *La Strada* (1954) and the influence of Neorealism, Bazin, one of the great legitimators of theorizing film, comments: "The truth is that theories have never produced masterpieces" (115). Often counted a father of auteurism, he sounds more like a seer of current theory when he conceives "that we are moving toward a reign of the adaptation in which the notion of the unity of the work of art, if not the very notion of the author himself, will be destroyed" (49). And best of all, Bazin's long-standing identification with the long take and deep focus as necessary techniques of a realistic film style becomes much less sclerotic when we read (in the first essay) ". . . one should be careful not to identify the cinema with any given aesthetic, or what is more, with any style" (18). It is impossible to read this new collection without a refreshed discernment of Bazin's critical achievement and a reformed view of his realism's meaning and scope.

Like Donald Rayfield's recent biography of Anton Chekhov, *Bazin at Work* enlarges a writer's accomplishment by re-illuminating the immediate concerns and prosaic limitations girding his creative responses. The book enriches Bazin through a sense, accumulated across the essays, of the suppleness of his thought. His apt reviews impress more with an increased awareness of their daily journalistic routine. He muses on, while enjoying radio's "environment of sound. . . . Right now, as I write this article, I'm listening to Jean Vittold's excellent, daily morning broadcast" (44). In 1946, he reconsiders *Scarface* (1932) because "I have little to add to what has already been written [on the recent releases, due to] . . . the delay that the publication rhythm of a journal imposes on me" (109–10).

Taken within a grind of popular reviewing, Bazin's assessments have aged well. He lucidly set out the issues encompassing CinemaScope at the moment of the technique's dissemination (1953). A year after the end of World War II, he bravely commented on the Allies' extremely influential *Why We Fight* films as heralding "a grave confusion of

values . . . the manipulation of psychology, credulity, and perception" (191).

Bazin as a practicing journalist/confessor had constrained space for capturing the souls of single films, filmmakers, and ideas about cinema. In the articles he extracts the essences of his subjects as a confessor estimates character, with quick piety. Bazin consecrates the great French film *Forbidden Games* (*Jeux Interdits*, 1952):

> If . . . we like to view childhood as if it were a mirror reflecting an image of us that is purged of all sin, cleansed of our adult stains, restored to innocence, then *Forbidden Games* refuses to play along. . . . As such, it is the first example of its kind on the screen (135).

The collection affirms the depth possible in weekly reviews with a critic such as Bazin, and in the climate he helped create for addressing films.

Most current newspaper reviews answer the demand, Is the movie worth the money? Bazin's criticism responds instead to the questions: If a film is worth seeing, why is it worth seeing as a *film*? And what place does a critic have as every movie offers its own epitome of cinema? In response, *Bazin at Work* helps distinguish two initial paradoxes—his central word—and eventual illuminations of film criticism.

Answering the first question, Bazin's first paradox claims that films most penetrate reality, and become most filmic through apparently inimical means. The most intensely realistic movie, such as *Scarface*, seems born from "a novel (or short story) that chose instead to become a film" (148). A special effect is most effectively fantastic when also most realistic (73). Films are most sacred when "working against" the medium's affinity for religious iconography (7); and a film such as Fellini's *I Vitelloni* (1953) reveals most about the souls of its characters as it "focuses most exclusively on appearances" (186). In each case, the "paradox[es] of realism"—the subtitle for Bazin's review of *Farrebique* (1947; 103–9)—depend on a critical understanding for their illustration. Bazin's writings justify a critic as someone who can synthesize, from many films, "the technique and the aesthetics that will capture, retain, and render best what one wants from reality" in a particular period (6).

If rubbing film realism in a direction opposite to custom attains a profounder screen reality, a critic has to envision a cinematic horizon beyond commercial expectations. A popular critic should see beyond public taste. Bazin then has to elaborate his second professional paradox: How can the accomplishments of many films and filmmakers conform to one progressive cinematic ideal? Bazin's preeminence for film professionals lies in his ability to portray different moviemakers' styles, and to mark each style in the greater evolving realism he uncovered for his time.

Here the balance in Bazin's writings grows both more contradictory and provocative. For example, Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* (Part I, 1944; Part II, 1946) is "a beautiful work" because of its clarity of style, despite "renouncing fifteen years of realistic cinema" (201). Bazin's appreciation of the work's uniqueness appears to surmount its antithesis to his cherished essence of film: " . . . we must make a distinction between the value of the style as such and the quality of its individual execution" (202). Bazin's paradoxes redound on his own efforts both to recognize the distinctive qualities of each film and to shape it to his preferred cinematic beliefs.

The essays allow the reader to gauge the movements between Bazin the theoretician, espousing a transcendent reality of film, and Bazin the practicing reviewer. As the latter, Bazin seeks to give a foreign, underestimated, or overly familiar movie a fresh public perception, while rising to argue for different values in a popular cinema. His entwined roles as an analyst, absolver, challenger, and expander of common notions of film remain compelling critical tasks. We miss Bazin's capacity to discuss individual films ("The Technique of *Citizen Kane*"), filmmakers ("William Wyler, or the Jansenist of Directing"), film techniques ("The Life and Death of Superimposition"), and methods ("Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest"). We have lost his interest in embracing and comparing film with other arts and sciences (from algebra to magnetism, geology to theology). We lack his large sensitivity to different movies. Most of all, we might revive his ability to stimulate thoughts on film whether from agreement with or in refutation of his arguments. The "faithful yet not literal" (xvi) translations by Piette and Cardullo render Bazin's approach translucent through each article. In the collection of *Bazin at Work* we find in the critic what he claimed for style in a film: "a way of thinking, the movement of a mind" (147), developed from exploring varieties of cinema.

Gabriel M. Paletz is a film scholar, critic, writer, and teacher currently taking advantage of Los Angeles.

Black Women Film & Video Artists

Edited by Jacqueline Bobo. New York: Routledge, 1998. $75.00 cloth; $19.99 paper.

Black Women Film & Video Artists is a welcome addition to a growing body of work on women filmmakers of color. Bobo has edited a remarkable anthology of groundbreaking new work in the history and theory of black women such as Madeline Anderson, Carroll Parrott Blue, Jacqueline Shearer, Alile Sharon Larkin, Kathleen Collins, Julie Dash, Camille Billops, Zeinabu irene Davis, and Michelle Parkerson. This anthology is notable for its contextualization of these artists within a framework of black feminist cultural critical methodologies, and for the inclusion of black women film and video artists in their own words in essays and interviews. Though it does not seek to provide a comprehensive history, it certainly is an important new critical volume that should be read by both professor and student alike.

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Jacqueline Bobo, who is well known for her earlier critical writing in *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (1995), provides a much-needed overview and critical perspective of the field in her opening chapter, "Black Women's Films: Gen-

esis of Tradition." Bobo notes that the widespread interest in black women in film has been slowly evolving in recent years. Yet, with the exception of the excitement over and critical reception of Julie Dash, director of *Daughters of the Dust* (1991), there is a "substantial body of work created by Black women film/videomakers" (6) that has been overlooked by film historians and critics.

Though many are now familiar with the work of Oscar Micheaux, few are aware of the significant contributions of early African-American women filmmakers such as Eloyce Gist, Eslanda Goode Robeson, and Zora Neale Hurston. Eloyce Gist, for example, was a contemporary of Oscar Micheaux who directed and self-distributed evangelical films as a touring evangelist. Two of her films, *Hellbound Train* and *Verdict Not Guilty*, are currently being restored by the Library of Congress. It is unfortunate that *Black Women Film & Video Artists* does not include a chapter-length study on Eloyce Gist and other overlooked and rediscovered early black women filmmakers; however, the anthology is not designed as a comprehensive survey of black women directors.

The book is divided into three sections: "Critical Perspectives," "Critical Practice," and "In Their Own Words." In the first section, Ntongela Masilela provides a rich examination of the Los Angeles School of African-American filmmakers, concentrating on Barbara McCullough, Carroll Parrott Blue, Julie Dash, and Alile Sharon Larkin. The struggle between the revolutionary tenets of the group, which worked to define black aesthetics against the grain of dominant Hollywood aesthetics, is read within the larger framework of black independent filmmaking. Gloria J. Gibson provides a critical overview of black women filmmakers who work to explore cultural memory, revealing "The Ties That Bind" diasporic films of black women. Monique Guillory's "The Functional Family of Camille Billops" is a trenchant analysis of the films of Camille Billops which draws parallels between Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Billops' *Finding Christa.*

In the second section of this book we find some of the most fascinating and compelling reading. "Critical Practice" includes five chapters written by filmmakers themselves, among them Carol Munday Lawrence, who successfully worked to convince public television executives that there was a viable nationwide audience for black programming. Lawrence notes that in the 70s, African-American filmmakers were still so few in number that "we all knew or had at least heard of one another" (102).

The importance of black networking is highlighted in Jacqueline Shearer's recounting of the making of *The Massachusetts 54th Colored Infantry* (1991), a televised documentary about the first black regiment (*Glory* [1989] was a fictionalized and historically inaccurate account of the regiment). Shearer, who was offered the project by Llew Smith, an African-American producer with whom she had worked on the "'Eyes on the Prize" series, was aided by a supportive network of black actors and producers, and by cinematographer Arthur Jafa. Similarly, O. Funmilayo Makarah recounts that through "the nurturing environment created by [Charles] Burnett, [Shirley] Clarke and other Black and Third World students [in L.A.], [she] was able to really grow as a film and videomaker" (136). Makarah is well known for her video installation on the Rodney King incident, which was designed for the California African-American Museum in Los Angeles. All of the essayist-filmmakers deal with the politics of representation—Carmen Coustant directly confronts the burden of representation with her defense of romantic love as a viable subject for cinematic representation in "Love on My Mind: Creating Black Women's Love Stories." Bobo has allowed for such a wide aim and scope in this anthology that C. A. Griffith's brilliant polemic on the need for scholars to recognize the input of "below the line" workers (such as camera, lighting and sound technicians) does not seem out of place. Her essay, "'Below the Line: (Re)Calibrating the Filmic Gaze," is a unique exemplification of a writer and filmmaker who is as at home with theory as she is with practice.

The interviews with black women creative artists in the anthology's final section offer insight into and perspective on black women's cultural history. In an interview with Gloria J. Hudson, filmmaker Michelle Parkerson candidly recounts the homophobia she met in both black and white communities. Parkerson is perhaps best known for directing *Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Boy* (1987) about a black woman who performed as a male impersonator at a drag review. Less well known is Parkerson's eight-year quest for funding of her film *Odds and Ends* (1993), an African-American sci-fi film set in the year 2086. Parkerson draws parallels between discrimination against African-Americans and gays and lesbians, especially with regard to funding and distribution, noting, "the complicity of these kinds of oppression is a chain-link" (187). Ntozake Shange, who is interviewed by P. Jane Splawn, draws broader strokes around the issue of the study of black representation: " The methodology has to be changed from the perspective of the owners down to the perspectives of the people who were once owned" (204).

These words perhaps capture the essence of the spirit of *Black Women Film & Video Artists*, and Jacqueline Bobo is to be commended for collecting and editing this fresh series of essays and interviews. (She also provides a suggested course design that can be taught either on the quarter or semester system, and a very useful filmography with a list of sources and a directory of distributors.) In addition to revising and re-envisioning the field of black women's visual cultural history, this book provides a balance between theory and practice. Perhaps its publication will inspire film historians and critics to rethink mainstream white canonized film theory and history as much as it will inspire others to begin the hard work of decolonizing the gaze of our students and ourselves.

Gwendolyn Foster is an assistant professor in the Department of English at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln; her latest book is *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1997).

The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940–1975

By Gregory D. Black. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. $59.95 cloth; $17.95 paper.

Bernardo Bertolucci's 1972 motion picture, *Last Tango in Paris*, reflects better than most films of the era the tremendous changes that occurred between the 1930s and the 1970s in what could be shown in American theaters—and also in what the public would tolerate. During the 1930s, filmmakers probably would never have attempted this story, and if by some chance they had, censors would have drastically altered it. After all, when a fully clothed Mae West appeared in the black-and-white picture *She Done Him Wrong*, in 1933, and sang "A Guy What Takes His Time," censor James Wingate insisted on cutting some of the lyrics. Many women who then sat on state and local censorship boards across the country endorsed Wingate's decision, and if anything, surely thought he had been too lenient. More than four decades later, Bertolucci's color film graphically depicted the sexual relationship between a middle-aged man, Marlon Brando, and a young French woman, played by Maria Schneider, and featured full female frontal nudity and frank dialogue. In the earlier era, there would have been widespread public condemnation and prosecution for obscenity. But in the 1970s, there was little sense of moral outrage even among American Catholics, and, as Gregory Black maintains in this well-researched book, women who voiced an opinion seemed most upset that there was no full frontal nudity for Brando (238).

Why did the power of censors decline? Why were movies accorded so much more freedom in the 1970s than they had been given only a few decades earlier? *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies*, Black's second volume on the history of American Catholics and movie censorship, provides insight into such questions. In his earlier book, *Hollywood Censored* (1994), Black dealt with the 1930s, a period that saw the adoption of the Production Code (in 1930) and the creation (in 1934) of two institutions that ensured its enforcement—the Production Code Administration (PCA) and the Roman Catholic Legion of Decency. The Legion grew to such an extent that it effectively became "a national board of censorship" (2), and *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies* tells how it gained its "power, used it, and finally lost it" (3). Black believes that the Legion and the Code crippled artistic freedom and prevented the cinematic treatment of "important moral, political, and social issues of the day" (239). His conclusion brings to mind a similar judgment made in 1940 by Morris Ernst and Alexander Lindey, who said, in *The Censor Marches On*, that the Production Code was "predicated on the susceptibilities of morons," that "its social policy is one of hypocrisy," that "it lends itself readily to abuse," and that "above all, it creates a viciously false picture of life."

Although the threat of boycotts by Legion followers terrified many Hollywood executives, Black argues that the Legion of Decency's power "was often more illusory than real" (65). That the Legion (and the PCA) exercised such power owed much to the timidity of Hollywood's leading filmmakers who, with a few notable exceptions—Howard Hughes, David O. Selznick, Spyros Skouras, and Otto Preminger—let others fight the censorship battles while they continued to reap profits from their own films.

One of the unsung heroes of screen freedom, in Black's estimation, was the film distributor Joseph Burstyn. Burstyn, who came to America from Poland in 1921, joined the Paramount publicity director, Arthur L. Mayer, in a business venture to import foreign motion pictures. Shortly after World War II, the two men brought to the United States a series of Italian movies—*Open City*, *Paisan*, *The Bicycle Thief*, and *The Miracle*. When the Legion of Decency declared that *The Miracle*, produced by Roberto Rossellini, was sacrilegious, and the New York board of censorship denied them a license to exhibit the film, Burstyn took the case all the way to the Supreme Court and, in 1952, won the landmark case that gave films protection under the First Amendment. The Court's decision weakened the authority of the Legion and the Code. Burstyn spent $60,000 of his own money in this fight, and had little support from Hollywood producers.

Although foreign films were not especially popular in the United States during the 1930s, they gained a wider audience after World War II. Produced in environments where filmmakers did not have to conform to the stringent rules that U.S. producers followed, these films often violated the Production Code. National censorship boards in Europe were usually "more understanding of human relations and less likely to cripple severely their own products, which were competing for screen time with the constant flood of American movies," Black explains. "The more foreign films played, the more Americans realized the extent of the system of censorship that kept Hollywood from the serious examination of serious topics" (89).

The Italian films that Burstyn and Mayer distributed in the United States before *The Miracle* are noteworthy in this regard. Rossellini's *Open City* (1945) portrayed Rome's liberation from the Nazis. In its depiction of lesbians, drug addicts, priests who aided the Communist-led underground in Italy, and torture, the film contained "a catalog of violations of the Production Code and of the Legion of Decency standards" (74). Yet the PCA's leader, Joseph Breen (a Catholic layman), and the Legion voiced few objections to the film because the Vatican liked it, and at the time, it was popular to represent the anti-Nazi underground as heroes. Nor did the PCA object to the repeated references to prostitution in Rossellini's *Paisan* (1946). After *Open City* and *Paisan* had gotten away with such open violations of the Code, Breen felt it important to enforce the Code more rigidly. He therefore refused to issue a PCA seal for the relatively innocent *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), directed by Vittorio De Sica, and felt compelled to make a case against Rossellini's film, *The Miracle*, in 1951. But *The Bicycle Thief* had already played before large audiences in New York City for a month before Burstyn even submitted the film for the PCA's approval. Burstyn continued to show the picture without the PCA's seal and it became obvious that movies did not need Breen's blessing to be successful at the box office. By the time *The Miracle* arrived, Breen and the Legion discovered that they no longer had the power to prevent its exhibition.

Why the influx of foreign films in the postwar period? Black does not fully answer this question. One possible explanation for this increase in foreign films might be the policies adopted after 1945 by Eric A. Johnston (the man who succeeded Will H. Hays). Johnston saw movies as an ideological weapon to be used in the Cold War against Communism, and was less concerned with issues of morality than Hays had been. He aggressively sought to expand Hollywood's foreign markets, and it is possible that, in return, he made reciprocal arrangements to bring more foreign films into the United States.

In addition to discussing how the importation of foreign films by distributors such as Burstyn and Mayer helped to undermine the Production Code and the Legion of Decency, Black—in another strong discussion—also examines the attempts to reform movie censorship during the 1950s. In that decade, the Legion and the PCA saw a steady erosion of their power. Breen retired from the PCA in 1954 and was replaced by Geoffrey Shurlock, who was more inclined to let audiences be the arbiter of film content than to hold studios to an independent standard of morality. Johnston, who realized that many people were beginning to watch television rather than go to the theater, presided over an attempt to modernize the Code in 1956. As a result, Hollywood obtained greater freedom to treat subjects such as abortion, homosexuality, and drug use. Thereafter "good taste" rather than strict morality was more and more used to judge films (154, 155). Black notes that "between 1955 and 1965, the debate over films would center on the issue of what was acceptable screen fare for adults" (141).

The efforts by Catholic intellectuals to reform the Church's position on movie censorship are especially interesting. Black shows that the Catholic Church and Legion of Decency changed their approach to cinema during the 1950s (a development also discussed in James M. Skinner's *The Cross and the Cinema* [1993] and in Frank Walsh's *Sin and Censorship* [1996]). Pope Pius XII in his 1957 encyclical adopted a far more positive tone toward movies than Pope Pius XI had done in 1936. Black devotes a chapter to this "new approach." Many priests and Catholic intellectuals felt that the Legion of Decency "badly needed reform" (145), and so the Legion liberalized its classification scheme and added new reviewers. Clearly, though, these reformers "did not envision . . . , nor would they have supported, the orgy of violence, full-frontal nudity, simulated sex, and the use of four-letter words as punctuation that have dominated filmmaking in recent years" (146).

These changes were but a prelude to the further decline of the Legion's power, and by the early 1960s, Black writes, even the organization's staff realized that "personal opinion more than morality" often determined what was recommended (210). The Legion changed its name to the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (NCOMP) in 1965. The following year the Code was all but dead, and two years later a new rating system took its place. When *Last Tango in Paris* appeared, there was "no demand for a national boycott by Catholics" (237), and little complaint in the pages of such publications as *Commonweal*, *America*, or the *Listener*.

Despite this work's strengths, Black does make assertions that are not always persuasive, at least to this reviewer. He maintains that "little compelling evidence" exists that large numbers of Catholics ever obeyed the Legion's dictates (148, 241). Here he diverges from earlier work on the Legion. Robert Janes in his 1939 Master's thesis found that movie attendance in Chicago dropped substantially when condemned films were shown in heavily Catholic neighborhoods. According to Paul W. Facey's 1945 study, *The Legion of Decency*, the Legion enlisted seven to nine million Catholics to sign pledge cards. Walsh's *Sin and Censorship*, a more recent study, notes that while Catholics were often less than "dutiful" in following the dictates of their Church, Legion-inspired pressure was often effective. Black's conclusions about the Legion's support appear to rely heavily on a 1934 report prepared by Lupton Wilkinson (a former journalist and Hays Office employee), who toured 20 American cities during the summer of 1934 to assess what influence the Legion was having. The Legion was then but a few months old, and Wilkinson found that it had had little impact. The extent of the Legion's support among parishioners during the remainder of the 1930s and 1940s needs further study. Certainly, though, by the mid-1950s, the threat of a Legion boycott had lost its impact. When Brigitte Bardot's *And God Created Woman* appeared in 1956, some theaters even used the Legion's "condemned" rating to sell the picture.

Black's assertion that the Legion and the PCA "demanded that the movies adhere to a moral code that had little to do with morality" (239) needs qualification. It seems clear that Father Daniel A. Lord, who was the primary architect of the Code (at least philosophically), wanted to bind movie entertainment to the Ten Commandments. Breen, who insisted on "a voice for morality" in films, was also serious about keeping movies connected to Judeo-Christian values. But Breen and the PCA were but one part of the Hays Office (later the MPAA under Johnston), which was essentially a public relations agency for the movie industry. It was never so much concerned with morality as it was with expanding markets for American pictures and creating a supportive environment for cinema and its culture. With the arrival of postwar prosperity and the increased freedom accorded to almost all forms of communication, it was perhaps inevitable that public attitudes toward movies would change and the old censorship would collapse. And with the coming of new media, it probably became impossible to continue imposing censorship, even if it had been thought worthwhile.

Despite these reservations, Black adds to our understanding of a period in which movies gained greater freedom. His book is grounded in archival research. In addition to using Burstyn's papers, the author has drawn on at least 15 other collections, including the PCA files in California, the National Legion of Decency Papers in New York City, and archdiocese records in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and New York. *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies* complements works on this topic by such writers as Walsh, Skinner, Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, and Frank Miller.

Stephen Vaughn teaches at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Documenting Ourselves

Film, Video, and Culture

By Sharon R. Sherman. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1998. $22.95.

Documenting Ourselves tells the story of documentary film from the point of view of the folklorist. Although defined but sketchily, Sherman's conception of folklore likens this field to anthropology and to ethnographic filmmaking. Unlike traditional anthropologists, folklorists, in Sherman's view, refrain from constructing overarching theories, insisting on following carefully prescribed forms of field work or seeking out exotic versions of the Other. The folkloric film, in fact, approximates more closely what Faye Ginsburg and others have described as indigenous media than ethnographic film itself: It is the work of people from a community, or "folk," preserving or describing the material culture of that community. This sometimes tenuous affiliation of filmmaker and folk moderates issues of power and misrepresentation that might otherwise arise.

In fact, Sherman relies on linkages of regional, ethnic, or national identity between filmmaker and subject to guarantee a humane, and usually humanistic, mode of representation. Her examples bear out this reliance. The work of Jorge Preloran (*Imaginero, Zulay, Facing the 21st Century*), Les Blank (*Yum, Yum, Yum! A Taste of the Cajun and Creole Cooking of Louisiana, The Blues According to Lightnin' Hopkins*), Pat Ferrero (*Hearts and Hands: A Social History of 19th Century Women and Quilts*), Bill Ferris (*Fannie Bell Chapman: Gospel Singer*), Joel Cohen (*The High Lonesome Sound*), Pete and Toshi Seeger (*Afro-American Worksongs in a Texas Prison*) all preserve or describe important aspects of communities with which the filmmakers claim affiliation. These affiliations are often based on regional background (Les Blank is from Louisiana, and so on) or a shared form of cultural expertise (Seeger, for example, is a distinguished musician himself) that overshadows considerable differences of class status and education, not to mention race and sometimes gender.

Running through this informative, scrupulously descriptive account of several dozen folkloric films and their qualities, we find a solid vein of humanistic trust. Like Robert Coles, but without the impassioned return to a 1930s aesthetic of social documentation, Sherman trusts in the capacity of folkloric film to "capture" the complexities of culture, the delicacies of filmmaker/subject interaction, and the "truth" of folk expression. Filmmakers repay this trust by providing full descriptions of their artistic purposes and intentions. Those experiences and practices that recognize a more thoroughly fraught field of cross-cultural representation, one vexed by desire and power, fetishism and commodification, find but passing mention here.

With the publication of *Documenting Ourselves*, folkloric film has come to greater prominence. Its significance, though, may rest more squarely on the individual films that comprise this potential subgenre of documentary and how we interpret them within multiple frames than on the singular frame of folkloric study that sets out to claim and understand them.

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The Films of Michelangelo Antonioni

By Peter Brunette. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998. $49.95 cloth; $17.95 paper.

The tide of Antonioni scholarship flows on; indeed, it seems to be rising. As Umberto Eco recognized as early as *The Open Work* (1962), Antonioni's films demand interpretative speculation. They provide no Hollywood-style plot resolutions but only a "field of stimuli" governed by "willed chance." They force us to find "our way amid all sorts of intellectual and moral dilemmas" through an open-endedness that is irresistibly tempting to exegetes. Obviously, the films mean something, but (to ape a phrase) it depends on what you mean by "mean."

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Brunette feels that critics have spent too much time looking for some overriding theme, like alienation, that would organize a persuasive "big picture," a megatext to explain Antonioni's oeuvre. He's right to warn us of losing the trees for the woods, the fine details of individual films for some levelling overview. He wants rather to explain how such hermetic films ever got made, let alone accorded a degree of commercial as well as critical success. Brunette's project is obviously worthwhile, and there is no denying that Antonioni scholars should face, directly, the "irreconcilable textual details of the films" by contextualizing and "framing" them (much like Vittoria, the Monica Vitti character in *L'eclisse*, attempts to make sense of the articles on her ex-lover's table). But by his own admission, Brunette does little in the way of "sociocultural fact-finding." (Modesty is this book's most commendable trait.) The historical background is sketchy, providing few substantive details about the Italian "economic miracle" that some say generated "Antonioniennui," or about the actualities of the swinging London scene in the 60s, or about the realities of African rebellions. When Brunette does write about politics, he uses the term in that fashionable sense

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Much of Brunette's book is devoted to a reinterpretation of Antonioni's films and a correction of the "flawed" interpretations of its predecessors. Brunette is a perceptive reader, both of the films and of the literature, and he is pretty even-handed in distributing praise and blame. For that Antonionians owe him gratitude. But his conclusions are subject to the same sort of critique that he uses against others. For instance, it seems a misreading of *Blow-Up* to claim that its protagonist is—or at least was intended to be—"an obnoxious human being, a predatory male," who bullies "grotesquely anorexic beings, horribly made up, who have been turned into near-monsters," and then to conclude that this "complete narcissist" moves "toward a more social sense of shared, participatory meaning" at the end of the film. Whatever Hemmings' downcast face may reveal in the final shot at the tennis court, it's hard to see in it any repentance about his treatment of women. That is hardly more persuasive than the common view that Hemmings' despondency reflects his realization that capturing reality on film is like playing tennis without a ball. Brunette's feminism, however admirable in its own right, falters as he acknowledges that Antonioni himself "vicariously" enjoys the photographer's abasement of females: in a telling quotation the director said that he "like[s] the protagonist, I love the life he leads." In his need to reconcile the director's approval of the photographer's proclivities with political correctness, the critic paints himself into a corner. It's hard to be persuaded that Antonioni's films mount "a sustained attack on the patriarchy," however much one agrees that they show considerable sensitivity (at least for their time) to women's psyches. A certain unease about projecting contemporary attitudes back into the 60s shows up in parenthetical remarks like ". . . do we read the films this way because feminism has altered our interpretive frame?" A good question, and unlike many writing on the subject today, Brunette has the courage to ask it.

One is also troubled by the assertion that psychological reality was "not Antonioni's goal," that the characters are meant more as "textual elements" than personages of emotional depth and substance. It is well known that Antonioni left his actors clueless as to who they were supposed to be. But that doesn't mean that they are mere visual tokens to deck out the mise-en-scène. On the contrary, what's fascinating is the exercise forced on the audience to figure out what, behind the silences or inane dialogue, is going on in the back of characters' minds. This opacity in not much different from what we encounter in ordinary life as we try to read people's motives from their facial expressions and body language. Still, Brunette's invocation of Brechtian "demystification" is ultimately modest, and whether there is a "mini-alienation" effect in Antonioni's films is a question worth asking.

But the avoidance of the psychological does not prevent Brunette from pursuing moral judgment, often with surprising vigor. There is a degree of ferocity in his condemnation of certain behaviors of men, for instance, the Sicilian oglers who "threaten" Claudia in Noto when she is still looking for Anna. Brunette uses this scene as an example of Antonioni's critique of the sociocultural Italian scene of the 60s. We can even agree that Sandro's masochism comes out of the same source. But then he goes after Sandro's person with hammer and tong: he is a weakling, a whiner, a "blatant manipulator." Somehow, to my mind, *L'avventura* mostly asks us to think of him as a lost soul, whose tears in the last shot are real, not crocodile. Certainly that view is more in keeping with Antonioni's characterizing phrase, "la malattia dei sentimenti," the malady of the emotional life. One hesitates to scorn sick people; compassion, even in this ideological age, seems a more appropriate response than denunciation. The same applies to the David Hemmings character: his camera is no more phallic or "raping" than Antonioni's own. And we must remember that female photographers, after all, often show no less zeal in uncovering the secrets of their subjects' souls.

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The Films of Oshima Nagisa

Images of a Japanese Iconoclast

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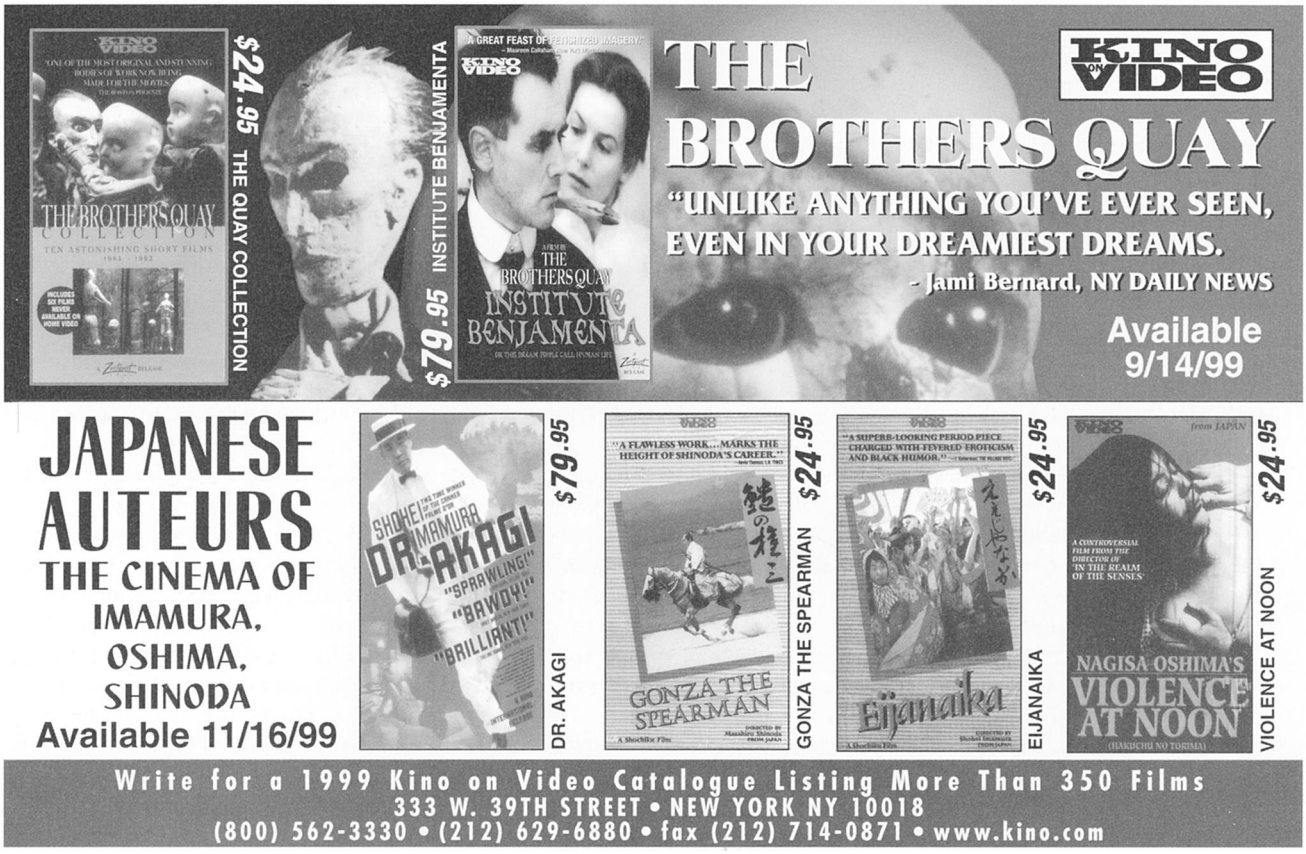
an iconoclast whose productions constitute an assault on the cherished beliefs and traditional institutions of Japan and generate new filmmaking practices to contest established screen convention. Her authorship study places Oshima in the context of Japanese, as well as international, post-World War II culture and draws upon a wide range of the critical literature as well as the filmmaker's extensive writings. Attention is given to Oshima's early personal history as it pertains to his filmmaking, but actually there are few biographical details after Oshima becomes a working director in 1959. Turim's treatment combines attentive formal analysis with an informed political interpretation continually driven by a psychoanalytic perspective.

Critics such as Peter Lehman have noted that Oshima employs a range of stylistic practices which shift from film to film. The New Wave disjunctions of *A Cruel Story of Youth* (1960) move to the more theatrical Brechtian devices of *Death by Hanging* (1968) which later settle into a relatively classical style for the daring erotics of *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976). As a result, the director's work is never characterized by any coherent development of a distinctive personal style. At the onset, Turim suggests addressing these shifts by evaluating each film on its merits, but she delivers more, as the various chapters frame Oshima's work into clusters, which invests his career with a resonant shape, if not a straightforward direction.

After reviewing the benefits and liabilities of authorship studies in her opening chapter, Turim turns to the films. Chapter 2 examines the blossoming of Oshima's talent in the tales of renegade youth and political alienation in his first four features, from *A Town of Love and Hope* (1959) through *Night and Fog in Japan* (1960). Chapter 3 jumps to the five works released between 1968 to 1971 which established Oshima's international reputation for stylistic daring and radical politics: *Death by Hanging*, *Diary of a Shinjuku Thief*, *Boy, Story of a Young Man Who Left Its Will on Film*, and *Ceremonies.* Then Turim discusses the two notorious tales of passion, *In the Realm of the Senses* and *Empire of Passion* (1980). Next an early work, *The Catch* (1961), and *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence* (1982) are analyzed in relation to their literary sources. Turim also evaluates Oshima's "partial success" with humor and satire in *A Treatise on Japanese Bawdy Song* (1967), *Three Resurrected Drunkards* (1968), *Dear Summer Sister* (1972), and *Max, Mon Amour* (1987). The following chapter examines six of Oshima's 22 television documentaries, little known outside of Japan, which focus on Japanese war guilt. The closing chapter, "Feminist Troubles . . . ," ponders the sensational and often demeaning treatment of women in Oshima's films, particularly the use of rape as a recurrent trope in his political allegories. Here Turim returns to films already discussed and then expands into a consideration of *Violence at Noon* (1966) and *Pleasures of the Flesh* (1965). Each chapter is divided into numerous subsections with appropriate titles—a structure which helps the reader follow Turim's argument and makes it easy to dip into the text and read the discussion of any par-



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Turim characterizes Oshima's formal practice during his most innovative period (and one might extend these observations to the career as a whole) as constructed around characters divided internally by contradiction, sequential fragmentation which links episodes through underlying poetic elements, and highly composed images which oppose symmetry and asymmetry, reflexive narration and theatricality. These formal strategies produce a complex politics focusing on the constitution of the self by history, family, and the state. As a result, characters struggle in a largely predetermined landscape over prospects for ethical choice and personal freedom. The 60s slogan, "the personal becomes political," finds a vivid and challenging expression in Oshima's films. His protagonists, rather than being social reformers or political activists, are usually confused, criminal, or both. In addition, the psychosexual turmoil driving these fictions invites a psychoanalytic approach which Turim wholeheartedly embraces.

I found the book most rewarding in providing a broad overview of Oshima's career and in learning about films, such as the television documentaries, of which I knew little. The most intriguing for me, based upon Turim's description, was *The Pacific War* (1968), which simply edits together in chronological order propaganda films released by the Imperial Government, from the attack on Pearl Harbor to the surrender. Rather than attacking the lies of the wartime government, Oshima simply lets their deception resonate in the context of postwar understanding. Turim's portrait of the broader context of Japanese culture, such as her references to postwar Japanese avant-garde theater or her consideration of Oshima's adaptation of Kenzaburo Oe's short story "Sakiku," provides a welcome perspective on the filmmaker. The individual interpretations offered by Turim proved to be judicious and generally persuasive without being particularly illuminating. I finished the book eager to see many of the Oshima films which I have missed, but not driven to view again those works, generally the most celebrated, with which I was already familiar. Part of the problem arises from Turim's prose, which is academic, careful in presenting its arguments, but neither elegant nor engaging. The book fails to capture the visceral excitement and disturbing resonance produced by the sexual obsessions, child abuse, and lurid scams which Oshima portrays. His mix of sensational subjects with an original but detached form, that juxtaposition of vulgarity and aspiration, makes Oshima an unforgettable screen experience. I only wish that Turim were more successful at communicating her enthusiasm and love for these films, which they so richly deserve.

Leger Grindon is Associate Professor of Film Studies and Chair of the Theatre, Dance, Film-Video Department at Middlebury College in Vermont.

The Films of Theo Angelopoulos

By Andrew Horton. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997. $35.00.

This first book-length study of Theo Angelopoulos could not have come at a better time or from a more qualified critic. Although critically recognized worldwide as one of the most important directors of the last quarter century, Theo Angelopoulos remains poorly understood, and his work is rarely screened in the United States. But the notoriety which surrounded the release of *Ulysses' Gaze* and the garnering of the Cannes Palme d'Or in 1998 for *Eternity and a Day* have finally begun to rouse critical interest in his films. Andrew Horton's book opens the door to a complex body of work and will do much to correct the notion that Angelopoulos is simply an eccentric individualist or a director overly infatuated with technique.

Horton brings special strengths to this project: He is literate in Greek, has lived in Greece for considerable periods, and has worked in the Balkan film industry, including Greek projects. Rather than sticking to a conventional chronological approach to Angelopoulos's career, Horton has opted for a more daring strategy. In Part One, three essays offer insight into the complex techniques favored by Angelopoulos and the various political and cultural problems he seeks to address. In Part Two, five specific films from each of Angelopoulos's major periods are examined in detail. In Part Three, two essays root Angelopoulos in modern cinema and indicate the new territory explored in his most recent films.

An insight that Horton brings to the study of Angelopoulos is that what is unique about the director is not his modernist sensibility, but the way he has employed that sensibility to explore political, social, and psychological interests. Horton's assessment begins with a poem by George Seferis featuring the thought that Greek artists are born with "this marble head in my hands/which exhausts my elbows and I do not know where to set it down." In short, the classic Greek tradition is an enormous burden for the Greek artist. Many choose to simply ignore the tradition in a total commitment to modernism. A smaller number are content to offer what ultimately amounts to minor variations in the old molds. Angelopoulos, Horton argues, has brilliantly incorporated traditional images and myths into the most modernistic of cinematic approaches for the purpose of dealing with contemporary social issues without sacrificing the values of the past. This renders Angelopoulos simultaneously an artist in the classic tradition and a cutting-edge modernist.

Horton's most insightful analysis regards the manner in which Angelopoulos has woven the version of the Orestes myth developed by Euripides into various films, most obviously and successfully in *The Traveling Players*. Horton explains that the myth is there almost as an invisible spine. If one is aware of the myth and its complexities, it offers an entry point into the film. If one is not aware of the specifics of the myth, catharsis comes from the immediate scenario at hand. The classic myth is meant to provide access for those familiar with it and to serve as a subliminal bedrock for the

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Angelopoulos has frequently stated that he believes resistance to his work in the United States stems from his avowed leftist politics. He believes critics are either so apolitical that they do not understand his subject matter or they are subconsciously (or consciously) alienated by his perspective. Horton deals with the immediate historical shortfall in most American knowledge about Greece by explaining how the deep social divisions that brought a civil war (1946–1949) and dictatorship (1967–1974) to that country inform much of the work of Angelopoulos, particularly from *Reconstruction* through to at least *Voyage to Cythera*. Like the mythical allusions in the director's work, the specifics are best seen as possible but not essential or exclusive points of entry. If one knows the Greek details, the commentary is historically specific, but if one does not, the events can be approached as fiction and accepted on the level of abstract political discourse. Angelopoulos insists that there is no hierarchy involved here or in the mythology. The various points of entry are conceived as democratic means for different viewers to have access to the work.

The third major area taken on by Horton is the famous or perhaps infamous Angelopoulian technique. The director has often expressed his admiration for writers such as James Joyce and Marcel Proust. Like their writing, his cinema insists that the viewer must not remain passive, must do more than gaze. Toward this end, the filmmaker's pacing is notoriously slow. This is designed to provide the viewer with time to think as well as to feel, to question what is on the screen rather than meekly absorbing images. Angelopoulos favors the democracy of the continuous shot and rarely offers a close-up. Tableaux are more common than jump cuts. Actors sometimes step out of their roles to directly address the camera. Time is as rubbery as a Dali watch; a scene beginning in 1949 may end in 1937. A scene of people dancing can encapsulate decades of social change.

Horton examines the rationale for this approach, making it clear that this not a matter of modernism for modernism's sake, not mannerism, and not idiosyncrasy. Rather, the director is trying to probe the problematics of time/space as seriously as Einstein did, but without sacrificing psychological, political, or social depth. By citing specific scenes in *Reconstruction*, *The Traveling Players*, *Voyage to Cythera*, *Landscape in the Mist*, *The Suspended Step of the Stork*, and *Ulysses' Gaze*, Horton deftly decodes what Angelopoulos is trying to do, candidly acknowledging that just as an Angelopoulos scene or film that works can be masterful, those that fail can be very tedious.

What is fascinating to Horton is how Angelopoulos, working in one of the smallest of the European states and one of the most fragile of European national cinemas, has been able to preserve a national identity without being seduced by national chauvinism. He discusses how the most recent cycle of films by Angelopoulos has literally moved to the borders of the Greek state to use the problems of the Balkans as a metaphor for problems of global migration and the challenges of shaping multicultural societies. In *Ulysses' Gaze*, Angelopoulos raises the question of whether specific European identities can survive the new world order. "We are a dying people," a Greek taxi driver wails in the Albanian mountains, but his "we" is not limited to Greece. Where do we lay the marble head of Europe?

Dan Georgakas teaches film courses at New York University and is a member of the editorial board of *Cineaste*; he is also coeditor of *The Cineaste Interviews* and *In Focus: A Guide to Using Films*.

Flatlining on the Field of Dreams

Cultural Narratives in the Films of President Reagan's America

By Alan Nadel. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997. $48.00 cloth; $17.95 paper.

Alan Nadel's *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams* takes apart some of the most commercially successful films of the epoch, demonstrating how they reflected, debated, and played with the dominant ideology of the time. He takes into account the revisionist attitudes towards blacks and women, trickle-down and other economic theories, and the seemingly insatiable hunger for a "simpler," safer past. Each chapter examines a different issue of the Reagan era—class, deregulation, the stock market and the triumph of the ethic of greed, working women, homelessness, AIDS, and what Nadel refers to as the "compulsion-attraction" film. Social and economic facts and figures, as well as political critiques from outside Cinema Studies, contrast with and enrich the frequently enlightening textual analyses.

Often cleverly and wittily written, *Flatlining* makes some surprising connections between such films as *Working Girl* and *Little Mermaid* (although Nadel might have wanted to consider Hans Christian Andersen's source material here); nicely details the class envy—and the glorification of the middle-class house—that pervades John Hughes' movies; and shows how homelessness was frequently dramatized as either a matter of choice or as a colorfully alternative lifestyle in such works as *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*. Particularly good are Nadel's investigations of lawbreaking in *Trading Places*, with its final, ironic image of a "classless" society, and of the racial dynamics of *Flatliners*.

However, the book also has some serious weaknesses, both structural and theoretical. First, for the most part, each film Nadel analyzes appears in only one chapter, examined according to only one perspective. This sometimes negates other important aspects of the picture; his deconstruction of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, for example, interestingly examines how the film negotiates images of AIDS. But it leaves unexplored both its covert depiction of race (Toontown as Harlem—even the name is evocative) and its play with various genres from detective to film noir, as well as animation.

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Nor does he bring in a broad range of film history: only *Trading Places* receives the benefit of an extensive comparison with a classic Hollywood film, *My Man Godfrey*. *House of Games* and *The Sting* also are contrasted, but the latter, as a 70s movie, already differs from the Golden Age products, plus Mamet is himself out of the mainstream, and his work hardly exemplifies the norm of the times.

Precisely how do Reaganite movies differ from similarly themed ones from the 30s, 40s, and 50s? Given Reagan's own link to the studio tradition, and its influence on his views, a splash of the past is definitely warranted. The desire to gain class and economic status, and the shame in one's class that Nadel rightly finds throughout 80s cinema, has long suffused everything from fairy tale to melodrama. Modern-day Cinderellas may not go to a palace, but they still need the perfect prom dress. And both Stella Dallas and Mildred Pierce surely paid high prices for attempting to climb the social ladder. Similarly, a chapter covering "ghost films"—such as *Ghost Dad*, *Field of Dreams*, and of course, the Oscar-nominated *Ghost*—details the need for the "dead father" to return and protect his endangered children, now alone on earth. This motif is hardly new, either: What about *Carousel*, to name just one example ripe for comparison?

In fact, *Ghost* generally receives one of Nadel's least successful critiques. He announces that "the objective again is to protect the 'daughter' in danger," without thoroughly working out the process by which he transforms the wife into the "child." Nadel also completely drops the ball on the racial implications of Whoopi Goldberg's caricaturized Oda Mae, an overwrought, clownish character with an instinctive connection to the supernatural—not to mention the film's canny sidestepping of alternative sexuality in the ultimate scene when Oda Mae's body stands in for Sam's for one final moment of lovemaking between husband and wife. Even the meaning of having ethnically typed killers for hire stand in for the *real* murderer doesn't receive much explication.

Nadel freely admits that his interests lie "in what films tell an audience, not what they tell us *about* that audience." But does such a complete separation truly exist, and can we know what a film is telling an audience without knowing who's out there watching it? As a result, with only one exception—*Jacob's Ladder*, a commercial disaster that avoided Reaganite sunniness—he never makes the distinction between box-office winners (like *Ghost*) and duds (like *Ghost Dad*), or suggests why the audience accepts one message and rejects another. Perhaps the line between success and failure lies only in the quality of filmmaking—which wouldn't automatically affect his argument about the cohesive ideology behind this cinema. But it's tempting to wonder exactly how much pleasure mainstream viewers took in watching *Ghost*'s murderously evil Yuppie descend to hell. Nor does *Flatlining* delve into questions of audience demographics and its effect on the text. Nadel rightly points to the power and wisdom of children and teens in these films, which is only to be expected given the importance of youthful repeat viewers to a movie's commercial fortunes.

Perhaps most problematically, Nadel constructs a series of elaborate metaphors for both cinematic strategies (such as editing) and narrative construction that seems desperately overstretched. In particular, he connects crosscutting with an

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By Francesco Casetti
Translated by Francesca Chiostri and Elizabeth Gard Bartolini-Salimbeni, with Thomas Kelso
Revised and updated by the author
The study of film entered a new era after World War II, as cinema became an acceptable focus for intellectual inquiry. The many ways in which cinema has been imagined, studied, and discussed in the last fifty years are the subject of this comprehensive overview of film theory in the United States and Europe since 1945. *Theories of Cinema* was originally published in Italy, where it won the Premio Domenico Meccoli—Scrivere di cinema 1993 of the Centro dello Spettacolo in Rome. This is its first English translation. The author has revised and updated this edition to cover the years 1945–1995.
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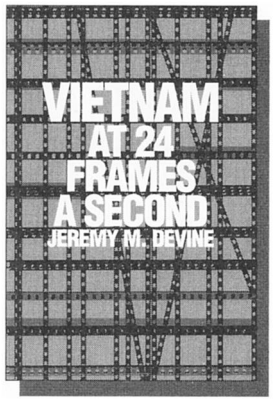

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"infinite amount of supply-side credit" because of its ability to stretch and ignore the bounds of real time. But as even Nadel himself points out, this infinite credit system empowers virtually all classical Hollywood film narrative; indeed, crosscutting has been with us since the days of Griffith (just to name the cinema's first true master of the technique) and before. While the introduction suggests a concern with how the ideology behind the technique slipped off the screen and into reality as an economic philosophy, this focus shifts throughout the book. If the issue is truly how classical Hollywood technique influenced Reagan's mindset and policies, why only examine the films that came out during his tenure? Instead, the emphasis remains on a film's formal qualities, suggesting, for instance, that the fairly banal crosscutting at the end of *Back to the Future*, and its "false" extension of time, somehow owes something to the prevailing structure of feeling rather than to a well-established film language. The thorny question arises: Does the use of crosscutting in films of the 1980s have a specific quality that sets it apart from its predecessors?

Similarly, the analysis of visual strategies for depicting women doesn't truly suggest anything particular to the era. Nadel makes much of *Working Girl*'s consistent focus on Tess's legs, even reproducing shots to illustrate his point. However, neither that subject—nor the objectification—are unusual on the screen. (And that's putting aside my own, different interpretation of the stills; when Melanie Griffith is slung over Harrison Ford's back, it's really her posterior that dominates the frame!)

Despite these problems, the book provides a good overview of the 80s film scene, and of Reagan politics. The choice of films includes several that haven't received much attention in academia, such as *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, and other fare more commercial than artistic. (Though some, like *Forrest Gump*, are themselves so obvious about their ideology that there's barely anything left to reveal.) And one place where the book will work extremely well is in the classroom: given students' often limited or nonexistent sense of history, it will familiarize them with the basics. Plus, these are movies widely known and seen, and therefore come with a built-in interest. But be warned: traveling back to this "field of dreams" can also feel more like nightmare than nostalgia.

Karen Backstein is an adjunct assistant professor at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, and has written on dance and film, television studies, and Third World cinema.

Gainsborough Pictures

Rethinking British Cinema

Edited by Pam Cook. London: Cassell, 1997.

This is a superbly detailed and concisely compact overview of Gainsborough Studios, with a combination of historical and critical work from a variety of different approaches. The general public impression, then as now (unfortunately), was that the "Gainsborough glossies" were disposable popular entertainments, unworthy of extended examination or discussion. This volume seeks a new critical stance—one that (as quoted by Cook from a 1983 National Film Theatre publication about the studio's productions) "can appraise such films without elevating them falsely into works of 'art' and without reducing them to mere socio-economic objects" (3).

From its inception in 1924, Gainsborough strove to offer something unique to both the public and exhibitors alike. Michael Balcon's tenure saw the production of a number of unconventional and ambitious features, some of which were Anglo-German coproductions. In fact, the Gainsborough identity was not confined to historical costume pictures to quite the degree that most mainstream histories of the British cinema might suggest. Nor were Gainsborough films invariably ridiculed by contemporary critics; a number of films, such as *Millions Like Us* (1943) and *The Man in Grey* (1943), received both plaudits from the press and substantial returns at the box office, and have since come to be regarded as classics of British wartime cinema.

The Gainsborough films gave the general British cinema-going public images of a fantasy world which they desperately wanted to inhabit, carefully packaged and commodified for mass consumption. They offered, among other things, an image of national identity that was not rooted in a slavish devotion to the Empire. "Prestige" films were one affair, suitable for export to the colonies and able to win both national and international awards, but Gainsborough gave its viewers the comedies of Jack Hulbert, Will Hay, the Crazy Gang and Tommy Handley, as well as the musicals of Jessie Matthews, some Edgar Wallace crime dramas, and, along with their more famous period romances, such films as *Marry Me!* (1949), a contemporary lonely-hearts drama/comedy, *Boys in Browns* (1949), a very early juvenile delinquency film, and more ambitious period pieces such as *The Bad Lord Byron* and *Christopher Columbus* (both 1949), which were much more stolid and straightforward in their reconstruction of the past than the typical Gainsborough film, and perhaps consequently, less successful.

Gainsborough, like other studios, developed stars whom the public would flock to see: Ivor Novello, Stewart Granger, Phyllis Calvert, James Mason, and Margaret Lockwood were perhaps the best known, but Gainsborough's comedy stars (Will Hay, Arthur Askey, Jack Hulbert, and Cicely Courtnedge, to name a few) were popular with audiences and exhibitors alike. Even the stars whom Gainsborough created and/or promoted, however, were not immune to criticizing the films they appeared in for the company: Stewart Granger characterized his work for Gainsborough simply as "junk" (112), and James Mason attributed his international success in *The Man in Grey* (1943) to what Geoffrey Macnab characterizes as his "inveterate dislike of the role." Noted Mason, "I have to conclude that my sheer bad temper gave the character colour" (111).

Like any well-run assembly-line studio, Gainsborough pushed its stars through a punishing series of features filmed at breakneck pace, and it is a tribute to the music, design, production, and cinematographic departments of the Gains-

"infinite amount of supply-side credit" because of its ability to stretch and ignore the bounds of real time. But as even Nadel himself points out, this infinite credit system empowers virtually all classical Hollywood film narrative; indeed, crosscutting has been with us since the days of Griffith (just to name the cinema's first true master of the technique) and before. While the introduction suggests a concern with how the ideology behind the technique slipped off the screen and into reality as an economic philosophy, this focus shifts throughout the book. If the issue is truly how classical Hollywood technique influenced Reagan's mindset and policies, why only examine the films that came out during his tenure? Instead, the emphasis remains on a film's formal qualities, suggesting, for instance, that the fairly banal crosscutting at the end of *Back to the Future*, and its "false" extension of time, somehow owes something to the prevailing structure of feeling rather than to a well-established film language. The thorny question arises: Does the use of crosscutting in films of the 1980s have a specific quality that sets it apart from its predecessors?

Similarly, the analysis of visual strategies for depicting women doesn't truly suggest anything particular to the era. Nadel makes much of *Working Girl*'s consistent focus on Tess's legs, even reproducing shots to illustrate his point. However, neither that subject—nor the objectification—are unusual on the screen. (And that's putting aside my own, different interpretation of the stills; when Melanie Griffith is slung over Harrison Ford's back, it's really her posterior that dominates the frame!)

Despite these problems, the book provides a good overview of the 80s film scene, and of Reagan politics. The choice of films includes several that haven't received much attention in academia, such as *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, and other fare more commercial than artistic. (Though some, like *Forrest Gump*, are themselves so obvious about their ideology that there's barely anything left to reveal.) And one place where the book will work extremely well is in the classroom: given students' often limited or nonexistent sense of history, it will familiarize them with the basics. Plus, these are movies widely known and seen, and therefore come with a built-in interest. But be warned: traveling back to this "field of dreams" can also feel more like nightmare than nostalgia.

Karen Backstein is an adjunct assistant professor at the College of Staten Island, CUNY, and has written on dance and film, television studies, and Third World cinema.

Gainsborough Pictures

Rethinking British Cinema

Edited by Pam Cook. London: Cassell, 1997.

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borough facility that even their most modest program pictures emerged with a high sheen of slick professionalism. Louis Levy, musical director at Gainsborough during its most influential period, skillfully used music to enhance the pictorial and emotional values allowed by Gainsborough's modest financial resources; Alex Vetchinsky's sets for many of the early Gainsborough films were marvels of sumptuous economy; and such veteran cameramen as Arthur Crabtree and Jack Cox brought both talent and passionate attention to detail, while never forsaking the overriding considerations of speed and economy.

Gainsborough's producers always kept their eye on the bottom line, and Robert Murphy offers compelling sketches of the three production regimes which followed Sir Michael Balcon's tenure at the studio: Ted Black, Maurice Ostrer, and Sydney Box. Black was much respected by his associates at the studios, and sought to widen the scope of Gainsborough's output, while Maurice Ostrer, feeling that the studio was best identified with its melodramatic romances, was responsible for such films as *Madonna of the Seven Moons* (1944) and *Wicked Lady* (1945), which both did excellent business. Indeed, of the ten films produced at Gainsborough under Ostrer's tenure (roughly December 1943 to June 1946), seven were solid box-office hits, and if his vision was rather monocular, it put him strictly in line with other genre-conscious, cost-effective producers such as Anthony Hinds and the Danzigers.

Sydney Box's *The Seventh Veil* (1945), made at the beginning of his reign at the studio, was one of Gainsborough's signal successes, winning the Oscar for Best Screenplay in 1945, and becoming the top-grossing film of the year in the United Kingdom (149). Box had been given the job at Gainsborough with the brief to triple production on a yearly basis; but several of his later, more ambitious films (especially *The Bad Lord Byron* and *Christopher Columbus*) fared badly with both the press and the public. However, he continued with Gainsborough up until 1950, when the studio was absorbed by Rank.

Taken as a whole, the essays in this volume offer an intelligent and well-supported revisionist view of the output of this archetypal British studio, placing Gainsborough's films within the social context of the nation that produced both the films themselves, and the *need* for the films among the members of the public. More than anything else, what Pam Cook and her collaborators seek to accomplish with this volume is the obliteration of the artificial and delineating line between "high art" and "low art." Complete with a detailed filmography, *Gainsborough Pictures* reminds us how much we may have forgotten from the recent past of British cinema, and how very much richer our experience will be when we put the contributions of such studios as Gainsborough into context with the films produced by the "prestige" studios in Britain from the 1920s to the late 1960s. *Gainsborough Pictures* also reminds us that, quite often, the public is more prescient in its appreciation of popular art than professional reviewers, and that the accomplishments of Gainsborough constitute a real and tangible contribution to the cinematic heritage of twentieth-century British cinema.

Wheeler Winston Dixon is Chairperson of the Film Studies Program at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, and editor of the State University of New York Press series on Cinema/Video Culture. Among his most recent books are *The Transparency of Spectacle* (1998) and *Disaster and Memory* (1999).

Hollywood's New Deal

By Giuliana Muscio. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997. $59.95 cloth; $22.95 paper.

History, as it has been practiced in film studies, typically has meant the history of films themselves. That is, we have studied genre cycles, studio output, director's careers, and the relationships between movie "texts" and their social, political, and cultural contexts. And for the most part, film scholars have been fully pleased with this kind of historical practice. Film journals rarely engage in discussions and debates about historiographic method, and with a few exceptions—Tino Balio, Lea Jacobs, Danae Clark, and Sumiko Higashi, for instance—film historians have seemed content to avoid most considerations of primary documents.

It is this very methodological blind spot that makes Giuliana Muscio's *Hollywood's New Deal* such a pleasure to read, and such an important contribution to the field. I know of no other project in film studies that makes such extensive use of so much documentary evidence. Of course, an all too common response after burrowing in the archive is to hold up what one has found and say, in effect, "Look!" The real trick comes in making sense of evidence, of using it in ways that can teach us things, or make us see them differently. This is precisely Muscio's accomplishment.

Muscio's point is that, by the 1930's, which is the period covered by the book, two industries—politics and communications—had come to merge functions, practices, and goals. Politics had developed a clear and coherent system of representation in order to bring its messages to the public, while communications, and particularly the movies, engaged in projects of national and economic analysis in order to explain and depict the effects of the Depression. Because of this symbiosis, it became difficult at times to tell government and entertainment apart. Charles C. Pettijohn, for instance, who was the chief counsel and primary lobbyist for the Motion Picture Producers and Distributor's Association, also oversaw FDR's relationship with the studios' newsreel producers during the 1932 presidential campaign. Then, just a few years after the election, Roosevelt's son James himself went to Hollywood to work as a producer; another son, Elliot, managed four of William Randolph Hearst's radio stations, while a daughter, Anna, married one of Will Hays' employees.

Of course, as Muscio points out, no relationships are ever monolithic, and no hegemony is ever without its weakness and points of stress. As a result, during the Depression, Hollywood and the Federal Government also were typically at odds, in the formation, for instance, of the NRA

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codes governing the industry, or in the various phases of the Paramount Case. To examine both the ties and the tensions between Hollywood and the Federal Government, Muscio makes use of an astonishing variety of documentary evidence, from the Roosevelt Library in Hyde Park, the Special Collections Library at the University of Southern California, and the Antitrust Division of the Justice Department, among archival sources.

For Muscio, practicing film history means that there is a broad field of texts that can be read. Indeed, Muscio includes no "readings" of any films; instead, she "reads" documents. As a result, she has produced the best overall history of the NRA and the film industry that I have read (the best NRA case study remains Danae Clark's *Negotiating Hollywood*, about the Screen Actors Guild). Muscio provides us, as well, with the finest and fullest interpretation of the Paramount Case that I know of. She begins her analysis of the Paramount Case with the 1927 Federal Trade Commission ruling against block booking, and she continues with a remarkable reading of documents that indicate the deep differences of opinion within the Justice Department itself, the various antagonisms between Hollywood and the government, and also the very amiable relationship between FDR and Will Hays, and their jointly developed strategies for bringing the case to a practicable conclusion. (The book is also not without its gossipy pleasures; in a family melodrama worthy of the movies, James Roosevelt, on the Board of Directors of United Artists, had to be listed as a defendant in the case.)

Muscio devotes the entire last chapter of the book to the Paramount Case. Other chapters detail the relationships between the deployment of the New Deal and the workings of the national media; the close relationships, in terms of personnel and political concerns, between Hollywood and Washington in the 1930s; the various forms of production in the 1930s that supported the New Deal, such as WPA newsreels and National Recovery Administration documentaries (including *The Plow That Broke the Plains*); and the legal and industrial apparatus of the movie business in the 30s. In each instance, the author provides wonderfully nuanced analyses of primary documents in order to chart the fluidity between governmental and cinematic practices.

This book is a model of informed scholarship. With its use of archival materials and its comparative analysis of institutional practices, *Hollywood's New Deal* provides a methodological model for the practice of film history, one that could help to transform a field that, for too long, has depended on movies themselves for most of its evidence.

Eric Smoodin is the Film and Media Editor for the University of California Press and Adjunct Associate Professor in the Film Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley.

John Huston's Filmmaking

By Lesley Brill. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. $54.95 cloth; $17.95 paper.

There's an old adage that it's not good enough for you to succeed; your friends also have to fail. Something akin to that seems to have infected academia, where it's not enough to have produced a worthwhile study; all others which have preceded yours must be wrong or inferior. Thus, for instance, I am implicated in Lesley Brill's otherwise fine and valuable study for having (co-)edited an anthology on John Huston with a "fashionably dreary title" which gives Huston too little credit for being the genuine auteur that, at least according to Brill, he is. That perhaps not every study of a director's career need be auteurist or that "authorship" as a category or an ontological state, for that matter, need not be a standard of value might be something for Brill to consider. Others, too, are castigated for not allowing Huston a genuine auteur status. With authorship as his primary standard of value, Brill has produced a defiantly, if not exactly unapologetically, auteurist analysis of Huston's career, seeking out those recurrences of theme, plot, style, and visual tropes which may be said to define the Huston "world view." Once he gets down to cases, Brill tends to be more generous in his acknowledgement of previous work while, without question, adding to our appreciation of Huston's cinema which is, truth be told, as Brill states, in need of further analysis and reflection.

Brill, like Huston himself, may be out of step with current fashion. A humanist in these post-humanist times, an unregenerate auteurist in these post-death-of-the-author days, and an unabashedly literary scholar in this media-saturated era, Brill perhaps protests too much in favor of Huston's authorship. That Huston might very well be considered the primary author of most of his films could be taken as a given, considering the fact that he wrote or co-wrote most of his own scripts; alternatively, that the vast majority (34 out of 37) of the feature films that he directed are adaptations of novels, stories, or plays has worked against Huston's image as the primary author of his films. But if we allow the issue of authorship to fade into the background, disavow its central importance as a standard of value, we find that Brill has illuminated Huston's cinema as few critics before him; if we are less than convinced of the overwhelming consistency among Huston's films, we come away more convinced than ever of the brilliance and richness of his best work.

Brill has wisely chosen to focus only on a handful of Huston's films. Though each film under analysis receives a separate chapter, Brill organizes these chapters into larger sections grouped around a similarity of theme or issue handled by the individual films within that section. Thus, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The Man Who Would Be King*, and *The African Queen* are grouped together as centrally about the issue of community and the self amidst a quest for external goals. *The Misfits*, *The Night of the Iguana*, and *Let There Be Light* are concerned with, metaphorically, finding, one's home; *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Reflections in a Golden Eye* explore the quest for

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self-realization, as do many of Huston's films, but here it is opposed by the weight of often oppressive social institutions. Somewhat more unusually than others, Brill accounts *Freud* an important Huston film and links it with *Fat City* as exploring psychological states of self-destructiveness and attempts at self-understanding. A concluding section looks at *The Dead*, Huston's final film, and, interestingly, at *An Open Book*, Huston's 1980 autobiography, understanding these two works as Huston's self-revelation and his summations of his life and artistry.

Brill engages each film at a close, attentive level, careful to highlight the particular narrative and visual strategies of each, while drawing comparisons and recurrences to other of Huston's works. We learn and appreciate much from the individual readings. But there is something very insular about Brill's project. In attempting to prove Huston's authorship and artistry, and a consistency and repetition across his career, Brill closes off Huston's cinema to the world at large. This is mirrored in Brill's citations, the vast majority of which are references to other books and essays on Huston's films. In attempting to clarify Huston's world view, Brill has given us Huston's world with little regard for the outside world. Those who already admire Huston's works and wish to learn more and those who wish to get a fine introduction to an overlooked artist could do no better than Brill's fine study. But Huston's status as a major film artist with a continuing significance beyond mere questions of authorship remains a debatable subject still awaiting proof.

David Desser is Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Theatre to Cinema

Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film

By Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. $95.00 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Not since A. Nicholas Vardac published *Stage to Screen* in 1949 has there been such a significant study of the complex relationship between theater and early narrative film. While Vardac saw nineteenth-century theater as "proto-cinematic" (striving for spectacular effects without film's technological means), Brewster and Jacobs "believe that the cinema strove to be theatrical," in other words, "to assimilate a particular theatrical tradition, that of pictorialism" (214). This tradition, as they define it, goes beyond the mere influence of painting on theatrical mise-en-scène and frame composition; staged and cinematic pictures become "part of the narrative structure" itself (14). In making their argument, the authors look alternately to theater and to film history.

In treating stage history, Brewster and Jacobs trace nineteenth-century theater's preoccupation with pictorial effects in staging and acting, paying special attention to actors' use of poses and tableaux. In contrast to the Aristotelian focus on action, they stress models of dramaturgy that conceive of "narrative as a series of pictorially representable moments" (19). In their analysis, they isolate fascinating American productions: the proliferation of stagings for *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the sensational on-stage burning of a building in Boucicault's *The Poor of New York* (1857), and Belasco's extraordinary lighting effects, such as the slow sunrise for *Madame Butterfly* (1900).

Perhaps most importantly, they detail modes of gestural acting, a form largely neglected after acting techniques that grew from Stanislavsky's ideas became predominant. Brewster and Jacobs insightfully and persuasively reject criticism which opposes gestural acting as "histrionic" to more familiar styles labeled "realism." As they state, "Because posing was keyed to genre and situation, and effectively coexisted with other, more fluid, uses of gesture, it does not make sense in our view to define it theoretically as opposed to realism, or historically as a precursor which was eventually superseded by the realistic acting style" (106). Their treatment brings renewed respect to acting that precedes Stanislavsky.

In treating cinema history, they probe how film's technology "necessarily transformed staging and acting techniques" (vii). Through detailed readings of filmed scenes with theatrical analogues, such as Edison's film of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903), compared with later versions by Vitagraph (1910) and World (1914), they trace the cinematic adoption of stage pictures. In shot-by-shot analyses, such as ones from *Klovnen* (*The Clown*, 1917) and Lyda Borelli's performance in *Ma l'amor mio non muore!* (*But My Love Does Not Die!*, 1913) contrasted with Asta Nielsen's in *Die weisse Rosen* (*White Roses*, 1915), they reveal transformations of gestural acting that take place as a consequence of the camera. They also discuss actors' necessary adaptations to changing spatial and temporal conditions created by camera and editing, especially in the American context. By examination of the pictorial in early film, they challenge what they call "an over-emphasis on the development of editing technique." Neglecting theatrical pictorialism, in their view, "has worked to focus attention on filmmaking in the USA at the expense of Europe . . . where developments in staging and acting played a more important part" (vi).

Theatre to Cinema represents a major step forward in the study of undertheorized aspects of film. Not only do Brewster and Jacobs take a new, and long overdue, look at the relationship of theatrical staging to early cinema, they also treat acting as an important locus of cinematic expression. Their study hopefully will lead to others that treat theatrical impulses in cinema and film acting as viable realms of inquiry. Beautifully illustrated, which makes the careful and detailed arguments all the clearer, *Theatre to Cinema* belongs on the shelves of theater and cinema scholars alike.

Sharon Marie Carnicke teaches in the School of Theater at the University of Southern California.

self-realization, as do many of Huston's films, but here it is opposed by the weight of often oppressive social institutions. Somewhat more unusually than others, Brill accounts *Freud* an important Huston film and links it with *Fat City* as exploring psychological states of self-destructiveness and attempts at self-understanding. A concluding section looks at *The Dead*, Huston's final film, and, interestingly, at *An Open Book*, Huston's 1980 autobiography, understanding these two works as Huston's self-revelation and his summations of his life and artistry.

Brill engages each film at a close, attentive level, careful to highlight the particular narrative and visual strategies of each, while drawing comparisons and recurrences to other of Huston's works. We learn and appreciate much from the individual readings. But there is something very insular about Brill's project. In attempting to prove Huston's authorship and artistry, and a consistency and repetition across his career, Brill closes off Huston's cinema to the world at large. This is mirrored in Brill's citations, the vast majority of which are references to other books and essays on Huston's films. In attempting to clarify Huston's world view, Brill has given us Huston's world with little regard for the outside world. Those who already admire Huston's works and wish to learn more and those who wish to get a fine introduction to an overlooked artist could do no better than Brill's fine study. But Huston's status as a major film artist with a continuing significance beyond mere questions of authorship remains a debatable subject still awaiting proof.

David Desser is Professor of Cinema Studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Theatre to Cinema

Stage Pictorialism and the Early Feature Film

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Transnational Chinese Cinemas

Identity, Nationhood, Gender

Edited by Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. $28.00.

Transnational Chinese Cinemas: Identity, Nationhood, Gender is in many ways an invaluable anthology. By including essays on films from Mainland China, Hongkong, and Taiwan, Sheldon Hsiao-peng Lu has provided the parameters for a different kind of discourse from any that we might have had considering the three cinemas as separate phenomena. Of course, identity and gender, part of the title, are issues in any cinema, but nationhood in Lu's book takes on a significantly different configuration. Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," which would tend to clump far-flung groups into one "nation" on the basis of that imagined unity, breaks down under the complexities of different ideologies in personal points of view, in aesthetic taste, in political intentions. Lu, whose point of departure is cinema as it impacts on nations, accurately points out in his introductory overview that "the globalization of cinema brings with it an erosion of the fixed geographic boundaries of nation-states" (16). Film scholars who accept the fact that English, American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand cinemas, or the Francophone cinemas for that matter, have different national agendas, will quickly understand that Chinese cinemas share as many differences as similarities. Though only some of the essays have comparative theses—it seems to be the nature of collections to be rather loosely centered—thoughtful readers, whether generalist or specialist, will put concepts together for themseves and supply their own organizing principle.

The critical essays on Mainland Chinese film still tend to be stuck, like the proverbial needle in the groove, on the issue of authenticity. Because the attacks against filmmakers like Chen Kaige and Zhang Yimou have been heard before, one wished for more defenders, if only for the sake of freshness. By now, complaining about this catering to an international market has become redundant. Transnational investment is a fact of life in Hollywood, as it is in China, as it is globally. More important, there should be room enough to grant the artist the space for self-reinvention, whether or not the realm in which this occurs is re-imagined or literal, whether s/he falls into self-Orientalization, or seems to be commodifying Chinese film for the West, or jeopardizes the authenticity of the film vis-à-vis what is or isn't "Chinese"—some (of the many) ways of talking about the same topic.

There are insights in Wendy Larson's "The Concubine and the Figure of History," where she "investigates the way in which *Farewell* appropriates the past to reject history in favor of fantasy as the means through which Chinese national subjects who want to enter transnational culture must produce personal and cultural narratives" (333). But she goes on to a Kaja Silverman-inspired development, arguing that femininity is "a new male possiblity," and referring to Sun Longji's theory that "Chinese men have all been turned into eunuchs" (334). And the closing essay, "Narrative Images of the Historical Passion: Those *Other* women—On the Alterity in the New Wave of Chinese Cinema" (a daunting title), by Yi Zheng, tries to depart from Rey Chow's *Primitive Passions*, but it is so intricately tied to Chow's argument that Yi's own points are often subsumed in the process.

In this particular collection, I found that I preferred the papers firmly rooted in history: they provided the double benefits of context and specific evidence. I appreciate the historical background in the opening essay, "Anti-Imperialism and Film Censorship during the Nanjing Decade, 1927–1937," by Zhiwei Xiao. The author is clear and informative on the Nationalist program during this crucial period in the development of a national cinema. Government "efforts to control foreign film distribution and studio activities inside China" (35) took priority over a host of other issues, and apparently had the support of the Chinese "cultural elite [who] never rejected government film censorship" (50). Though one is occasionally distracted (here and in other essays) by the Chinese flavor of the written English, in Xiao's thesis-driven essay the substance consistently shows thorough research and lots of evidence to support his thesis.

An essay at least as, if not more, essential is June Yip's "Constructing a Nation: Taiwanese History and the Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien." Yip demonstrates an expert grasp of history and a fine-tuned, sensitive response to Hou's films, especially in terms of the unusually multicultural complexity of so many different layers of languages spoken in Taiwan.

Given the wide-ranging coverage, as well as the diversity within the practices of the various cinemas, not to mention the individual authorial stances Lu had to organize, the wonder is that the book has as much of a logical internal structure as it has. His juxtaposition is useful in several instances. Gina Marchetti's analysis of "*Two Stage Sisters*: The Blossoming of a Revolutionary Aesthetic," which follows Xiao's history, illustrates ways other than the ones Xiao reports of educating the Chinese viewing public into entering the intimidating world of modernity. A smoothly written, jargon-free piece, it succeeds in locating "a peculiarly Chinese socialist aesthetic that [does] justice to the representation of women" (78).

In "From 'Minority Film' to 'Minority Discourse': Questions of Nationhood and Ethnicity in Chinese Cinema," Zhang maintains the verve of scholarship that is part of the book's impact. His is surely the definitive short work on the subject of minority film, and he has the requisite breadth of vision to broaden his discussion into a reflection on minority discourse. His exploration of "unresolved questions" at the end summarizes in brief what many of the essays that follow discuss yet again:

> Indeed, it might be speculated that one of the greatest successes of New Chinese Cinema lies in its "cultural exhibitionism," its repackaging . . . of what is generally believed to be Chinese national culture (which is always already mystified and Orientalized in the West) and its redistributing to the international film market. For many Chinese viewers, it is precisely what the Western audiences might mistake for authentically "Chinese" in these recently

successful Chinese films that has provoked indignation and criticism (96).

The section on Taiwan and Hongkong films of which Yip is a part includes "The Diaspora in Postmodern Taiwan and Hongkong Film," by Jon Kowallis, a breezily written comparison of Stan Lai's *The Peach Blossom Land* with Allen Fong's *Ah Ying* that I wish were more enlightening than it is; Wei Ming Dariotis and Eileen Fung's essay "Breaking the Soy Sauce Jar: Diaspora and Displacement in the Films of Ang Lee," which is too structurally dependent on that soy sauce jar for its own good; Anne Ciecko's "Transnational Action," which is a perceptive look at John Woo, first in Hong Kong, now in Hollywood, and Steve Fore's lively, fact-packed explication of Jackie Chan and "the cultural dynamics of global entertainment."

Part Three, the last section, is devoted to "Engendering History and Nationhood: Cross-Cultural and Gendered Perspectives." E. Ann Kaplan is her usual, confident, intelligent self, blending psychoanalytic theory with personal observation on *Farewell My Concubine.* Kristine Harris delves deep into "*The New Woman* Incident: Cinema, Scandal, and Spectacle in 1935 Shanghai." For those who have not seen Ruan Lingyu in that remarkable silent film or known of the scandal of her suicide, Harris's carefully researched essay is a fine reading of that paradigmatic moment when "an individual and a community [are] perilously positioned on a line between the new and extinction" (298).

"Gendered Perspective: The Construction and Representation of Subjectivity and Sexuality in *Ju Dou*," by Shuqin Cui, is another one of those analyses that try to cover too much. One critic in the old days of New Criticism named it the "exhaustive fallacy," a writer's delusion that it is possible to cover everything there is to say on his/her chosen topic. The book closes with Larson and Yi.

There is, unfortunately, a gap in this anthology between pre-WWII, pre-Liberation/Revolution (depending on one's political stance) of Xiao's opening essay and full-blown Communism under Mao. Although Yingjin Zhang's piece refers to the "spectacular box office success" (87) of two post-WWII movies (1947), *Spring River Flows East* and *Eight Thousand Li of Clouds and Moon*, both of which aimed to revitalize the idea of nation, there is a noticeable lacuna from 1937 to 1964. And, possibly, reformulations of Silverman and Chow should have come in a less conspicuous position than the final chapters, allowing the book to end on its strong points, its original contributions. There's much yet to be discovered about the pains of nationhood. The intellectual heft of this or any other anthology nevertheless depends on the "strongly kept" (Robert Frost's phrase) intention of its focus. As noted, some essays inspire; others, a bit rewarmed, diffuse and distract from the forceful thrust of what I assume to be Lu's overall idea for the book. Lu has not quite arrived at a new synthesis, or a full articulation of the significance of what he has so painstakingly put together.

Phebe Chao has been a faculty member at Harvard, Bennington, and Peking University (Beida). Her recent essays appeared in *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* and in *Jump Cut.*

Tropical Multiculturalism

A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture

By Robert Stam. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1997. $59.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

The first book-length history of Brazilian cinema to take as its subject the representation of multi-ethnic Brazil, Robert Stam's *Tropical Multiculturalism: A Comparative History of Race in Brazilian Cinema and Culture* succeeds in all three of its interrelated and complex projects. At once a reciprocally comparative study of the racial formations of Brazil and the United States and a theorized essay on the multicultural analysis of racialized images in film and video, *Tropical Multiculturalism* also enriches the scope and depth of Brazilian cinema history by moving away from a tendency to organize historiography around questions of a national cinema under invasion by Hollywood. Stam approaches Brazilian cinema both in terms of the representation of the fact of a multicultural society and as the artistic creation of multicultural producers, casts, and crews. He is thus is able to address the "popular and national cinema" issue from the perspective of Brazilian culture as predominantly African-inflected, and to investigate Brazilian cinema history from the often overlooked angle of the two-way relationship between racial formations and film representations.

Multiculturalism, as Stam defines it, must be a profoundly comparatist project attuned to transnational analogies and disanalogies between the cinematic images of the cultures and communities in the Americas which have roots in parallel experiences of conquest, colonialism, slavery, immigration, and diaspora. Stam demonstrates how multiculturalism can function as a critical method that works "to restructure knowledge and cultural relations in function of an antiracist perspective" (17). *Tropical Multiculturalism* provides many critical performances in the form of socio-historically contextualized close readings of important films. These are insightful interpretations which demonstrate the strengths of Stam's theorization of multiculturalism as a critical method committed to antiracism but devoid of reflectionist realism and the essentialist formulations of identity politics.

In two previous books, his *Subversive Pleasures* and, coauthored with Ella Shohat, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Stam refined the multicultural analysis of representation as stereotype by grounding the critique of the racialized image in Bakhtin's concept of both representation and the real as highly mediated utterances occurring within historically situated discourses. The method is perfectly suited to Stam's investigation of race and ethnicity in Brazilian cinema—indeed, Stam's interpretive approach takes many cues from the 1920s Brazilian Modernist and 1960s Tropicalist movements in the arts as well as from Brazilian popular music and Afro-Brazilian dance, religions, and sociality. Stam limits what could easily become an unwieldy topic, given the diversity of cultures involved in the "contact zone" which

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is Brazil, primarily to the representation of Afro-Brazilians and, to a much lesser extent, of indigenous peoples. He consistently relates the construction of "redness" and "blackness" to that of "whiteness" and to the multiple conceptions of *mestiçagem* (mixed cultural and ethnic heritage) which exist in Brazil.

In two introductory chapters, "Historical Preamble: The European/Indigenous Encounter" and "Comparative Diasporas: The Aftershocks of Slavery," Stam delineates the key historical comparisons and contrasts between Brazilian and American racial formations and racialized representations of "red," "black, and "white" through a comparison of the two countries' interconnected histories of conquest, colonization, and nation-building. His writing maintains a clear and vivid interweaving of description and analysis of social processes and their representation in the cultural sphere as he introduces historical details and perspectives essential to understanding the stakes involved in his examination of the connections between racial formation and cinematic representation in Brazil.

The book is organized chronologically from its second chapter, "The Structuring Absences of Silent Cinema, 1898-1929," to the penultimate chapter, "Toward the Present: Cultural Victories/Political Defeats." Each of the ten chapters containing film analyses takes up a genre, performer, director, mode of film production, cultural movement, critical stance, or image or theme that has been of central importance to the representation of Native and African-Americans in Brazilian cinema. Stam marshals a corpus of hundreds of films and videos featuring multicultural images of Brazil, some well-known films of world cinema (such as Camus' *Black Orpheus* and Lima Barreto's *O Cangaceiro*), some classics of Cinema Novo (such as Rocha's *Barravento* and *Terra em Transe*), and many films not previously analyzed by film scholars in the United States—and, in some cases, not even in Brazil.

Stam points out that although issues of race and ethnicity are culturally omnipresent in Brazil they are often textually submerged (19). *Tropical Multiculturalism* is exemplary as a model of the imaginative and persistent research into and interpretive reading of archival materials and films required in order to foreground levels of representational meaning which are constructed as the background in relation to a dominant figure. To obviate the muted dialogical or relational nature of racialized representation, Stam brings an array of Film Studies approaches to bear on Brazilian cinema. For example, Stam presents performance studies of two actors without whose screen presence much of Brazilian cinema would disappear—Grande Otelo in Atlântida Studio's musical comedies and Antônio Sampaio (Pitanga) in the films of Cinema Novo. A comparative reception study of how Carmen Miranda's performances in Brazilian carnival productions and in Hollywood signified differently to Brazilian and non-Brazilian audiences points out the pervasive African influence in Brazilian culture, and shows the imbrications of imperialism and racism in the dominant cultures of both countries.

Stam's readings of 1950s Vera Cruz Studio productions extends our picture of what those films were like and why they were anathema to the young filmmakers of Cinema Novo. Vera Cruz took on the theme of slavery and abolition in films such as *Sinhá Moça* (*The Plantation Owner's Daughter*, 1953) and *João Negrinho* (*João the Black Boy*, 1954/1958), which Stam compares with Hollywood productions such as *Gone with the Wind.* A chapter on films set in Rio's *favelas* provides fresh interpretations of Nelson Pereira dos Santos' *Rio 40 Graus* and *Rio Zona Norte* as films representing an unprecedented perspective on Brazil's racially inflected forms of class exploitation. The contrast with *Black Orpheus*' Eurocentric idealization of life in the *favela*, which Stam unpacks here in a reading rich in production details, highlights Nelson Pereira dos Santos' important role in adapting Neorealist esthetics and production strategies to the Brazilian filmmaking milieu.

Stam begins a set of three chapters on Cinema Novo with a reading of Triguerinho Neto's *Bahia de Todos os Santos* (*Bahia of All the Saints*, 1960), a film that addresses the specifically racial dimension of social oppression in Brazil, revealing that film's themes and political approaches to be prophetic of Cinema Novo concerns. Stam places the internationally recognized films of Cinema Novo in relation to important precursors, such as Roberto Pires' *A Grande Feira* (*The Big Market*, 1962), and films contemporaneous with Cinema Novo's productions, such as Antunes Filho's *Compasso de Espera* (*Marking Time*, 1971/73) These comparisons highlight the achievements, blind spots, and contradictions of Cinema Novo's cultural politics and broaden the repertoire of analyses of important Brazilian films from the period overshadowed by the work of Cinema Novo directors.

Stam notes the marginalization of images of black women in Brazilian films and of black women directors in Brazilian cinema, as well as the sexism inherent in some of the portrayals of women in both Cinema Novo and in the work of black male directors of the 1970s. The only omission I can detect in Stam's film history is Raquel Gerber's 1988 documentary *Orí*, which sets up a dialogue between the Jewish-Brazilian director and the Afro-Brazilian intellectual and activist Beatriz Nascimento on the subject of the *quilombo*, or maroon republic, as a quintessential historical experience of diasporic African identity. But this omission may be due to Stam's stated focus on the fiction film (although fortunately that does not stop him from considering some important video and film documentaries).

Bakhtin's heteroglossia meets the polyphony of Afro-Brazilian *candomblé* and carnival and the decolonizing discursive anthropophagy of the Brazilian Modernist Oswald de Andrade in Stam's method of reading the representation of Afro-Brazilian concerns in Cinema Novo and in the films of the black directors of the 1970s culmination of the "slow fade to Afro." Through his deft juggling of multiple narrative foci, Stam brilliantly reconstructs the call-and-response patterns of the discursive situations structuring racialized representation in Brazilian cinema.

The many stills included in the book are integral to full comprehension of the text and stress the multicultural look of Brazilian cinema. Stam's conclusion summarizes the advantages of his method for multicultural image studies; he also calls on Brazilian filmmakers to look to Brazilian popular music as a local example of intertextuality, seeing it as a playful cannibalism of imposed as well as welcome cultural discourses. While this might sound like a prescriptive ending, it actually is not, since Brazilian Modernist cultural anthropophagy, as Stam describes it, is precisely an antidote to the stagnating effects of official proscriptions of national culture.

Tropical Multiculturalism's exemplary comparative cultural studies methodology, impeccable film scholarship, and astute theorization of a nonessentialist multicultural approach to image studies recommend it as an essential text. It is well organized for pedagogical purposes and a pleasure to read for all concerned with generating more critical consumption and production of multicultural representation in film and video.

Anne-Marie Gill is a Ph.D. candidate in the Comparative Literature Program at the University of Iowa.

The World According to Hollywood, 1918–1939

By Ruth Vasey. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997. $54.00 cloth; $17.95 paper.

Will we ever get over our fascination with the workings of Hollywood's self-regulation? Not if we can continue to read books like *The World According to Hollywood*. Informative, drawing on otherwise untapped archival sources, and bristling with analytical intelligence, Ruth Vasey's new study takes what some might consider the abstract aspects of industry self-regulation—its firm roots in business concerns and Hollywood's distribution realities—and makes it compelling. There are few discussions of the Hollywood canon in this book—*Morocco* (1930), *Duck Soup* (1932), *The Merry Widow* (1934), and *Only Angels Have Wings* (1938) are the most prominent films cited. This is no drawback, however, for one gains a fine understanding of the logic by which Will Hays, Joseph Breen, and their associates negotiated with producers over movie content within and beyond the strictures of the notorious Code.

Vasey wastes no time in revising the received wisdom about the 1922 formation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors' Association (MPPDA), where the Breen Office resided. We're accustomed to tracing Hays' hiring by a panicked industry to the Fatty Arbuckle scandals, but Vasey shows how threats of anti-trust action against the vertically integrating companies, along with rapid expansion in Hollywood's international distribution, made it necessary to better coordinate trade matters. In particular, the industry confronted, in early 1922, Mexico's ban on American films in response to the omnipresence of the greaser stereotype (this challenge, and not Fatty Arbuckle, was on the MPPDA's first meeting agenda). At the most fundamental level, then, the home of the future Production Code Administration (PCA) developed out of distribution realities.

Of course, cleaning up Hollywood's image was important in the early 1920s, and here Vasey stresses the roots of the PCA in Hays' brainchild, the Committee on Public Relations, formed just months after the MPPDA's first meeting. The scheme was to give civic leaders and the educated middle class a stake in Hollywood filmmaking, or at least the illusion that that the studios were both responsible and responsive to their complaints. Revamped in 1925 to be more systematic as the Department of Public Relations and led by former Red Cross executive Jason Joy, this division instructed its voluntary associates across the country to praise the worthwhile films and remain mute about the morally disappointing ones. With this plan, Hays and Joy hoped (in vain as it turned out) to encourage studios to produce more wholesome, harmless entertainment. Simultaneously, Hays convinced the Department of Commerce to create a Motion Picture Section that kept the film industry informed of foreign market conditions, and to intercede on the industry's behalf abroad—an accomplishment equal to fighting off federal censorship bills or many of Hays' other, more visible achievements, since the foreign market roughly accounted for 35 percent of the studios' gross income.

Having delineated the industry pressures that gave rise to self-regulation in the studio era, Vasey turns to content regulation itself, emphasizing several novel points. One is the importance of the bottom line. Exhibitor associations continually protested to the Federal Trade Commission during the 1920s that block-booking (forcing exhibitors to book all of a studio's films sight unseen) forced theater managers to traffic in substandard, star-less bombs which could also be morally reprehensible. Vasey describes the majors' reply to such charges in 1927: "Rather than discuss the legal implications of their monopolistic business practices, of which block booking was a symptom, the producers and distributors assured the commission that their products were—or would be henceforth—entirely clean and wholesome" (48). The producers and Joy came up with the 1927 "Dont's and Be Carefuls" as an earnest of their good faith. Content regulation was a sideshow, a smokescreen put up to distract critics from Hollywood's fundamentally monopolistic lock on the business.

The industry followed the same logic when confronted with European complaints of American market dominance, and this is Vasey's second new perspective: the way foreign pressures affected production. The studios promised their international critics that they would script and photograph more responsible ethnic/national types. Here again, distribution affected the dynamics of Hollywood's portrayal of foreignness, and the more important the market, the more positive the portrayal. Most notably, a villain who was written as German became Russian in the finished film of *The Woman Disputed* (UA, 1928).

The many stills included in the book are integral to full comprehension of the text and stress the multicultural look of Brazilian cinema. Stam's conclusion summarizes the advantages of his method for multicultural image studies; he also calls on Brazilian filmmakers to look to Brazilian popular music as a local example of intertextuality, seeing it as a playful cannibalism of imposed as well as welcome cultural discourses. While this might sound like a prescriptive ending, it actually is not, since Brazilian Modernist cultural anthropophagy, as Stam describes it, is precisely an antidote to the stagnating effects of official proscriptions of national culture.

Tropical Multiculturalism's exemplary comparative cultural studies methodology, impeccable film scholarship, and astute theorization of a nonessentialist multicultural approach to image studies recommend it as an essential text. It is well organized for pedagogical purposes and a pleasure to read for all concerned with generating more critical consumption and production of multicultural representation in film and video.

Anne-Marie Gill is a Ph.D. candidate in the Comparative Literature Program at the University of Iowa.

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With 35 percent of the gross at stake, Will Hays called the foreign market the sword of Damocles hanging over the industry. Considering the case of *Bachelor Father* (M-G-M, 1931), one can see why. In the American version, the title character has many children by a series of legally married and legally divorced wives. The French, an SRC member warned the producers, might find this offensive; they would prefer that the father not marry and divorce so often, but remain married and philander. Though Vasey's dual focus on domestic and foreign pressures bifurcates each chapter, she takes pains to persuade us that often foreign market concerns were consonant with those of the special interest groups in the States.

The advent of the 1930 Production Code enabled Jason Joy to resort frequently to textual ambiguity in mediating between sensation-seeking filmmakers and the industry's critics. To avoid giving all kinds of offense, seductions occured between fades out and in, definite locales gave way to mythical kingdoms, and villains were frequently American (Dracula was an ideal villain, being inhuman and hence lacking in nationality). Jason Joy allowed producers to tackle any subject, short of abortion, no matter how controversial, as long as the treatment was delicate. While most public censorship controversies pitted opposing interpretations of particular films against each other, Vasey's research shows that Joy and his cohorts were well aware of the potential for different audiences to interpret films differently. Becuase it left so much discretion to the mind of the viewer, however, this system was pronounced ineffective by industry critics and the Payne Fund Studies authors. Since Joy also relied on studio participation, it was a faulty system. We learn, for example, that from 1930 to 1931, Warner Bros. was the least cooperative major studio; M-G-M cooperated, while insisting that Irving Thalberg could give any controversial subject delicate and acceptable treatment.

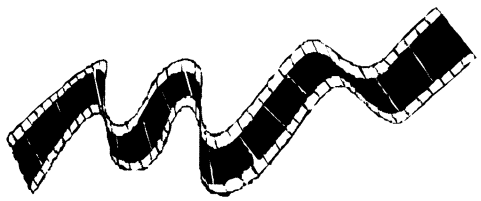
Like Lea Jacobs, Vasey sees Breen's reign not as a decisive break with his predecessors but as a continual effort to strengthen industry self-regulation. Breen forced audiences to work harder to see sophisticated interpretations of story events, and insisted that scenes of passion could only be shown if they were justified for the story; crimes committed had to be punished. Breen also strengthened Hollywood's sensitivity to foreign markets, whereby studios—mindful that Great Britain made up 30 percent of the foreign market—would omit shooting certain church rituals, details of violent scenes, depictions of unjust rule (which might rile up inhabitants of the colonies), and always show twin beds for married couples. In one chapter, Vasey presents several case studies to show how a film's budget, its range of distribution, its source material, and its thematics all affected the extent to which foreign pressures could influence filmmaking. For instance, RKO carefully altered the big-budget *Last Days of Pompeii* (1935) to satisfy Great Britain, avoiding excessive gruesomeness and not depicting Christ on screen.

Vasey's final chapter surveys Hollywood's handling of "industry policy," the way the Breen Office addressed topics and situations—foreigners, foreign nations, politicians, professionals, locations, ethnic types, businessmen—that were not explicitly addressed in the Production Code but which could cause as much trouble as the irresponsible depiction of sex and violence. Filmmakers had to be careful not to offend doctors, lawyers, social workers, and especially newspaper publishers and media figures who might create a backlash against the movies. The treatment of eroticism created a situation where the more suggestive the scene or fade-out, the more powerful the sensuality in the viewer's mind. Here Vasey makes some interesting observations about the associations between sexuality and naiveté formulated in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and culminating in Marilyn Monroe. She shows how Breen wrote the stage directions ensuring straight line readings in particularly suggestive situations in *Bachelor Mother* (1939), involving an unmarried teenager's apparent motherhood. Sexual naiveté enabled films to avoid openly acknowledging their sexual implications and offending Hollywood's diverse audiences. Exoticism similarly followed a logic all its own—foreign characters and settings were said by Will Hays to be deployed for purposes of contrast and interest, not authenticity. The assumed norm for characters was white, middle class, and consumerist rather than specifically ethnic.

One concludes *The World According to Hollywood* with a deeper appreciation for how, why, and what the MPPDA and PCA accomplished. Film scholars often remark that distribution is the the key component of industry practice; Vasey is the first in a long time to explicitly and insistently show us why this was the case: all the qualities we love about classical Hollywood cinema rested upon the industry's extensive distribution networks. (Vasey also demonstrates along the way the enormous value of consulting Federal Motion Picture Commission Hearings and the Trade Information Bulletins on foreign and domestic film business published by the Commerce Department.)

Vasey asserts that one can better understand the better-known history of domestic self-regulation when one considers foreign pressures on the studios, and vice-versa (9). *The World According to Hollywood* backs up this claim decisively. As she shows, the resulting "world" in Hollywood films was "a realm apart, a self-contained universe, melodramatic but fundamentally benign, with little direct relevance to the experience of its audience outside the cinema" (226). This is institutional Hollywood history of the highest order—and a pleasure to read.

Matthew Bernstein is editor of *Controlling Hollywood*, a new anthology on movie censorship for Rutgers University Press.



"You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet"

The American Talking Film: History and Memory, 1927–1949

By Andrew Sarris. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. $35.00.

"Memory" here is Sarris's own, not the industry's or the generic American moviegoer's, or a consensus of film scholars. Few serious writers on the cinema could muster such easy chutzpah about equating history with personal remembrance. But then few have seen and remembered as many movies or can spin yarns and voice opinions in prose so sharp. This is vintage Sarris—an encyclopedic command of an immense corpus of films (some recalled from early childhood), an irrepressible penchant for ex-cathedra judgments and rankings, and a somewhat less persuasive claim as theorist.

The book extends the preoccupation with auteurs of his earlier *The American Cinema, Directors, and Directions, 1929–1968* to studios, genres, and actors and actresses, in a "critically weighted history" of the American sound film up to 1949 (where he stopped for breath on the advice of his editor). The 500 pages of material unfold in sections of disparate length, ranging from a paragraph on Wanda Hendrix to 45 pages on John Ford. This scope results in some sketchy short takes, but the good writing and general informativeness (especially if you like anecdotes) makes it all tolerable. Sarris's emphasis on directors persists: the chapter devoted to them runs twice as long as any other. Discussions like that of Ford could stand alone as monographs, a format which might have served the author's purposes better.

Sarris remains an unreconstructed auteurist, but he nuances his position to accommodate such oft-asked questions as how auteurs were possible at all in studio-dominated Hollywood. One answer, among others, is that the "culturally moronic moguls" were good-humored (if self-hating) folk, fully capable of laughing at themselves (even hiring gag/malapropism writers to underscore the image), and that this somehow allowed them to indulge "dedicated crafts employees to work creatively within the margins of dissent and irreverence." Within that tolerant context, it was possible for distinctive studio styles to arise—the high-gloss "sweetness and light" of MGM; the Europeanized elegance of Paramount (Lubitsch, Sternberg, Wilder, Leisen, Mamoulian); the "gritty street entertainments" of Warner Bros.; the "rusticity and [devotion to] Americana" of 20th Century–Fox"; the schizophrenia of RKO (Dr. Jekyll = *King Kong*, *Citizen Kane*, Hawks, Cukor, Ray, Lang, Fuller and Hitchcock—vs. Mr. Hyde = Howard Hughes and Joseph P. Kennedy).

The section on genre discusses the musical, the gangster film, the horror film, the screwball comedy, the Western, the film noir, and the war film. Only the first and sixth are handled in detail, and that doubtless reflects Sarris's view of their relative aesthetic merit. With the exception of sections on a few primarily musical directors, like Busby Berkeley, and directors who were only occasionally such (Pabst, Sternberg, Mamoulian, Lubitsch), the emphasis is mostly on performers—Jolson, Chevalier, Macdonald and Eddy, Astaire (with and without Ginger Rogers).

Most of those who merit inclusion in "The Directors" chapter were already installed in Sarris's original pantheon—Chaplin, Ford, Griffith, Hawks, Hitchcock, Keaton, Lubitsch, Welles, and Ophuls (but not Flaherty, a documentarist; Murnau, presumably because he died before he could do much with sound; or Renoir, because he came late to Hollywood). Fritz Lang, however, does get discussed in the film noir section. Some second-rung directors originally inhabiting "the far side of paradise"—King Vidor, Harold Lloyd, Preston Sturges, Stevens, Borzage, Capra, and Cukor—make this cut. Two "less than meets the eye" types, Billy Wilder and William Wyler, are recuperated. (So is John Stahl, but not Sirk, Walsh, and some notable others.) Wyler, called in *American Directors* "a cipher as far as personal direction is concerned," fated to an "inevitably dismal destiny," now comes off better, to the extent that his very "directorial faults can be made to fit into the notion of a personal style." Still, *The Best Years of Our Lives* is not quite what it's cracked up to be.

Sarris's self-imposed terminus ad quem, 1949, precludes serious discussion of the later films of his front-rank directors—films like *The Searchers*, *Vertigo*, *Rio Bravo*, and *Touch of Evil.* Discussions of the longer-lived directors tend to end abruptly, obscuring judgment of their careers overall. Readers will just have to wait for Volume 2. Sarris breaches his chronological limit, however, when it suits his purpose, for example, to explain a concession that he had "grossly underrated Billy Wilder, perhaps more than any other American director." He is sorry he had "let people talk [him] out of . . . instinctive enthusiasm" for *Sunset Boulevard* (seen 25 times), *Some Like It Hot*, *The Apartment*, and the others, and praises Wilder's "mellow masterpieces" of the 70s.

"Actors and Actresses" contains sections on Garbo, Cagney, Bogart, Sullavan, Bergman, Dunne, Loy, Shearer, Harlow, Stanwyck, Colbert, W. C. Fields, the Marx Brothers, Tracy and Hepburn, Gable and Lombard, and Vivian Leigh. This is the least satisfying of the chapters. Having reconciled the auteur theory with the Hollywood system, Sarris seems quite content with, even committed to, the "star" as opposed to the "actor"; indeed, given his nostalgia, one wonders why he didn't entitle the chapter "Stars." Each is considered primarily in light of his or her career persona. Of course, that's the way the system worked, except for rare crosscasting in *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *The African Queen* (Huston is still not one of Sarris's favorites). Sarris never questions this industry practice. He even seems to celebrate typecasting, expressing upset, for example, about Wilder's casting Fred MacMurray as a villain, and about his "needless brutalization of Jean Arthur in *A Foreign Affair.*" Brutalization? (*The American Cinema* had similarly condemned Huston for inflicting "casual cruelty" on Marilyn Monroe in *The Misfits*). But Jean Arthur was a gifted actress, with vast stage experience, and surely capable of and entitled to versatility. How can any serious critic so easily accept Classic Hollywood's restraints on gifted performers? And where is the discussion of many-sided actors like March,

Olivier, Welles, Cotten? Even Vivian Leigh is treated more as the subject of a personal crush than as a great actress in the British tradition (a tradition which, by and large, Hollywood misunderstood and misused): "Even in repose," elegizes Sarris, "her flashing green eyes . . . surge forward in search of her destiny. There is no complacency in her steady gaze, no narcissistic self-indulgence. She is still searching for her emotional soulmate even though she knows she risks madness and destruction in the quest. Indeed, this is ultimately a face that reflects a woman and an icon unafraid of going over the edge and into the abyss." Who exactly is Sarris writing about here? The actress, with her broad range of talents? The characters that she was cast to play? Some kind of ideal Leigh, the Leigh of (male) dreams?

A charming postscript entitled "Guilty Pleasures" ends the book, expressing affection (beyond their deserts?) for Louise Brooks, Mary Astor, Anne Baxter, and Wanda Hendrix, and for the films *Gaslight*, *Lost Horizons*, and *My Foolish Heart*. There are four appendices—Academy Awards: Nominations and Winners, 1927–1949; New York Film Critics Circle Awards, 1935–1949; and Sarris's own 1963 rankings of Best Directors, 1927–1949, and Best Performances, 1929–1949.

Seymour Chatman is Professor Emeritus of Rhetoric and Film and Professor in the Graduate School at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of *Antonioni, Or The Surface of the World* (1985) and *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (1990).

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BFI Film Classics. Indiananapolis, IN: University of Indiana Press/BFI, 1998. $10.95. Crittenden, Roger. *La nuit américaine*. Fisher, Lucy. *Sunrise*. Kitses, Jim. *Gun Crazy* (BFI: 1996). MacCabe, Colin. *Performance*. Pym, John. *The Palm Beach Story*. Vincendeau, Ginette. *Pépé le Moko*. (BFI Film Classics are now edited by Rob White, who replaced Ed Buscombe after the latter's retirement.) In *La nuit américaine*, the movie's film-within-a-film (*Je vous présente Paméla*) provides a core around which Truffaut embeds film references among its plot interstices and then organizes his feature around the smaller film. Crittenden draws on Truffaut's personal notes and letters, which include a run-in with Godard. Lucy Fisher finds *Sunrise* characterized by wavering boundaries, a centrist position between literature and film as well as between silent and sound traditions. Born as Friedrich Plumpe, Murnau rechristened himself after a Bavarian town associated with the Blaue Reiter group, and Fisher discovers likenesses between *Sunrise* scenes and the painters' works. Her rumination on spectatorial responses to the film is exemplary.

Gun Crazy draws on personal interviews with Joseph H. Lewis and Peggy Cummins; Jim Kitses' monograph also discusses the effects of B-movies on film noir and on Godard's early work. Kitses makes a strong case for *Gun Crazy*'s reputation. In Roeg's *Performance*, class-based sexual experiences are translated by MacCabe into rock/criminal, politically inflected distinctions, equally imbued with politics. Pym's study of *The Palm Beach Story* consists largely of an entertaining plot résumé organized to emphasize Sturges's biography, American topical history, and wartime sexual roles.

Vincendeau sequentially discusses the evolution of Jean Gabin's popular screen image, French crime films, colonialism, and *Pépé le Moko*'s narrative constriction of Gabin within his criminal domain. Duvivier's 1937 production is contrasted with *Algiers* (1938) and later, less specific likenesses in *Casbah* (1948) and *Toto le Moko* (1949).

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Dixon, Wheeler Winston. *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1997. $59.50 cloth; $19.95 paper. Godard's 76-film career is traced chronologically from 1954 to 1995 in a five-chapter volume that also includes a 43-page filmography, a 21-page list of works cited, a list of rental sources, and an index. In his introductory chapter, Dixon provides a brief history of the filmmaking industry, film theory, and Godard's biography, drawing on the work of previous scholars, but always expanding on that work with his own observations and opinions.

The remaining chapters include insightful examinations of Godard's major films (*Contempt*, *Alphaville*, *Masculin Feminin*, *Made in the U.S.A.*, *Deux ou trois choses*, *La Chinoise*, and *Weekend*) and a study of the filmmaker's proccupation with video. In his final chapter, Dixon posits that Godard set out to create a series of "cinematic meditations for his own edification and spiritual survival" and "to create an inventory of images for a proposed history of cinema." In his estimation, Godard "has created a cinema that offers us the spectacle of ourselves."

Throughout the volume, Dixon's recounting of the technical details of Godard's work is both comprehensive and interesting. The author set out to provide a thorough overview of the filmmaker's career, while simultaneously considering the social, political, sexual, racial, class, and economic issues addressed by Godard (and his collaborators Jean-Pierre Gorin and Anne-Marie Miéville) in his films and videos. At the same time Dixon wanted to discuss the concept of "the end of cinema" and to show how the collapse of narrative was part of a joint effort to exhaust the medium. He accomplishes admirably all that he set out to do, and in a literate and graceful style.

Steven H. Gale

Martin, Len D. *The Republic Pictures Checklist*. Jefferson, N.C.: MacFarland, 1998. This reference includes complete information on all of the 946 features, 71 short subjects, 66 serials, 16 training films, and five cartoons released by Re-

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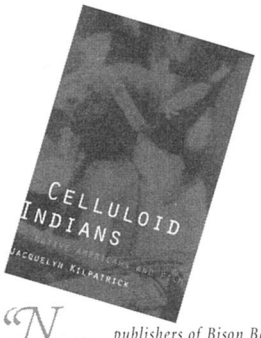

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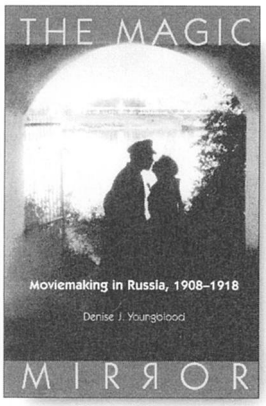

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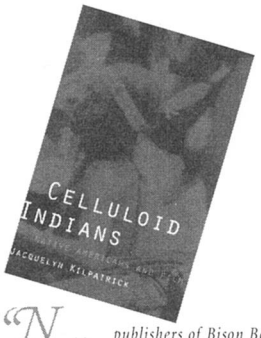

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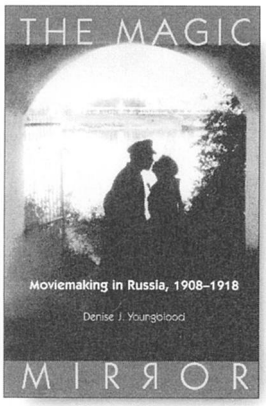

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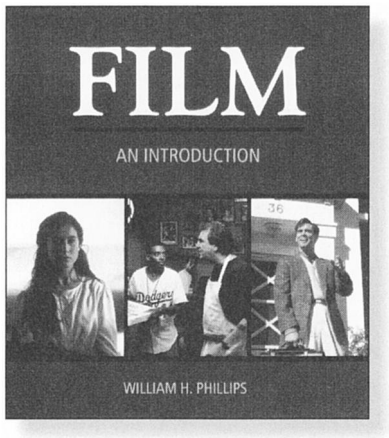

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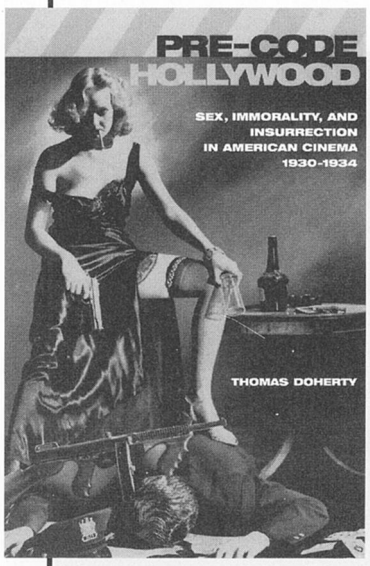

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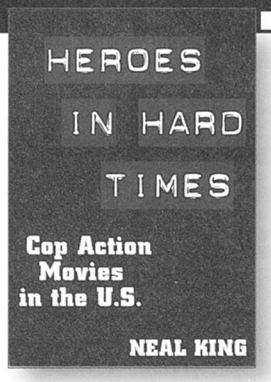

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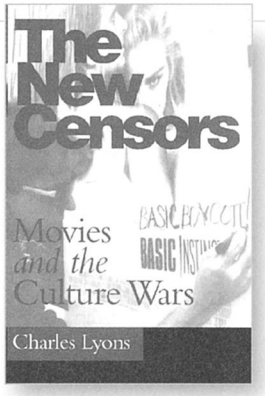

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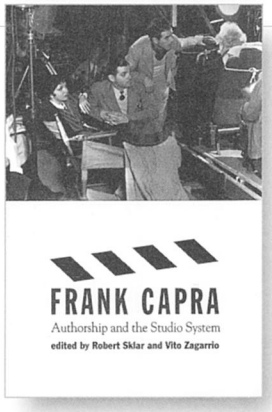

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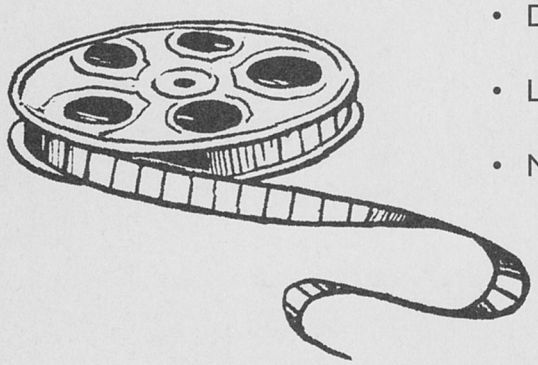

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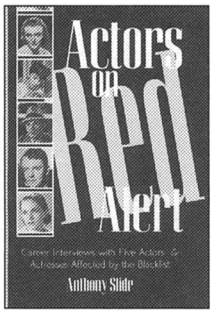

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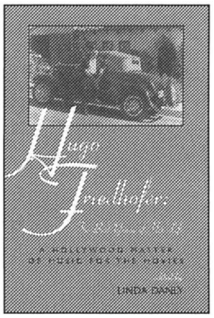

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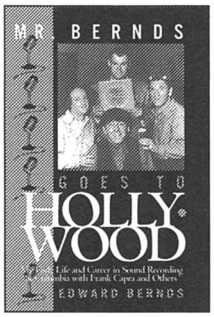

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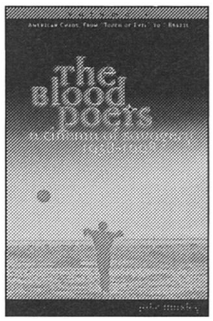

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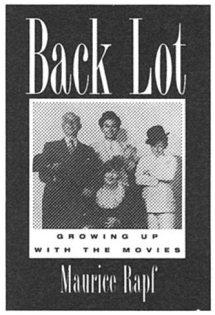

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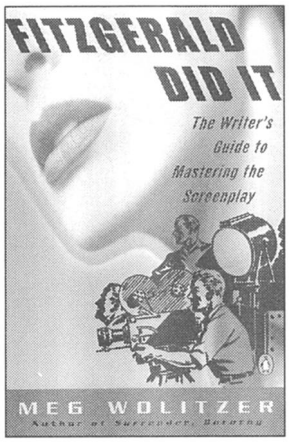

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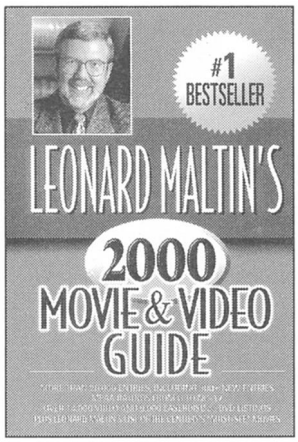

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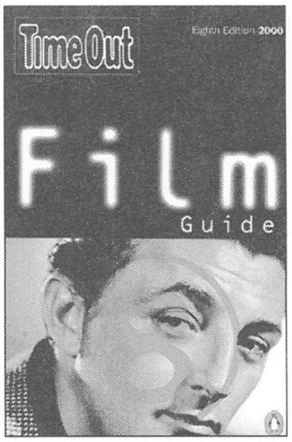

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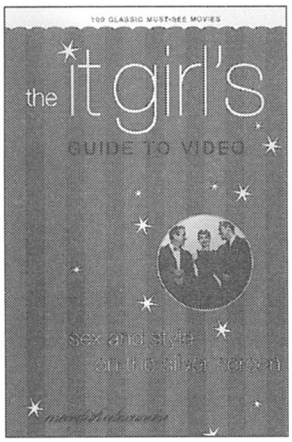

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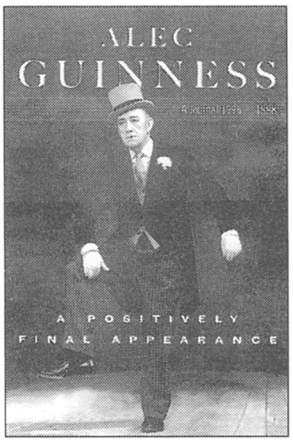

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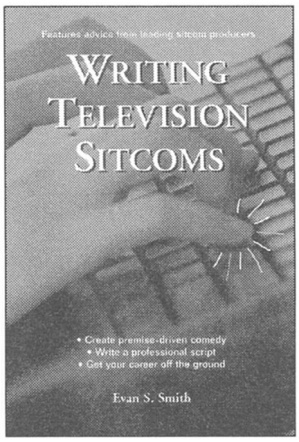

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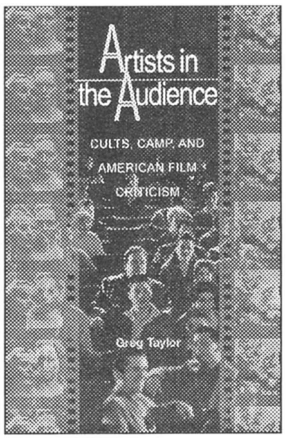

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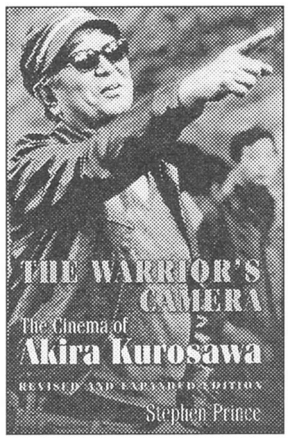

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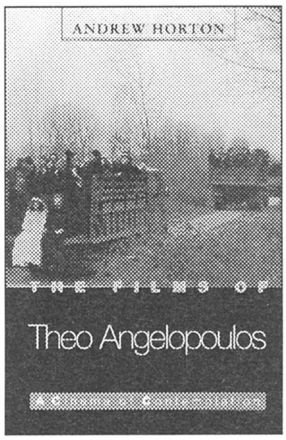

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